

Sangheili Polvora

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Summary: The Elites of the Command Station Radiant stop hearing from the frontlines, and soon after, the reason why finds them. With a starship and a psych at hand they do what they do best. The fight is on.

## 1. Grace Period

"Sangheili PÃ³lvora"

**\*\*Chapter One, part one:\*\***

**\*\*1400 hours; Central Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Noise filtered through the zero-g atmosphere with an almost liquid resonance to it, the voices of his comrades on the comn often drowning it out. The communications were kept to a minimum, however, and it was just as well- he needed to hear that odd syrupy noise as much as he required the feedback from his teammates. Enin 'Lygotee hated missions like these, but there practically was no helping them, and inevitably \_someone\_ had to do them.

The Grunt Rebellion was in the past, and since the rise of the newest Arbiter, the Heretic Uprising on the remains of the first Halo they had found was silenced as well. Still, this never allowed that all was well and good in the world, and times like these were nothing different. 'Lygotee and his team of Elites were moving through the open-ended mod-bay to cut off the retreat of a small band of unruly Unggoy that had taken it into their heads to become a problem to the Covenant.

A small one, but problems left unsolved never made anyone's day. Plucking his plasma rifle from it's secured place at his hip, 'Lygotee checked the power node to ensure it was fully charged. He usually performed this ritual twice or three times within a mission before the action began, but it wasn't paranoia- the Elite had had the misfortune to become stranded once with a depleted rifle in the

presence of a hotzone. To his left, Thin 'Pohamee, to his right and rear, Elco 'Obaulee, and behind him was Rkwa 'Lavuree. His friends and trusted fellow warriors, these three could be counted upon to act within a timely manner when it counted, and each had proven themselves numerous times.

The four Elites had almost always managed to come away together with less than fatal injuries when sent to fight. Humans, the parasite often called Flood, even sometimes against select members of their own Covenant. Today, 'Lygotee was feeling good, and he hoped to subdue the unruly Grunts- there were seven of them, mechanically inclined- without much in the way of incident. But when he reached for the outer control of the airlock door that would allow him and his team entrance to the station, he realized the lights on the panel were dark.

Blast! Why the smart ones? 'Lygotee snarled as he turned to 'Obaulee to issue orders to make a less than subtle entrance. It would complicate things- for one, sealing the breach would mean closing off a sector of the station so the interior didn't blow out the hole they were about to make when the force field surrounding the ribs holding position between them and open vacuum faltered. Or worse, failed.

After 'Obaulee was in position, 'Lygotee moved away to give the other Elite space to work as well as clear the blast radius so he wouldn't need to dart away when it went boom. He turned back when he heard 'Obaulee give a grunt of partial surprise and shock. Looking past his teammate told 'Lygotee the door had just opened either by internal operation or by itself- the latter seemed unlikely, yet the former seemed more so. He moved closer, drifting slightly above the doorframe as he did so.

Hiding behind the air mask all of his kind wore when in like company and carrying the leaf-shaped tank on his little shoulders, the Unggoy seemed small indeed. But he looked back at the Elites at the door with as much bravery as he might have been capable of mustering. By repute, that wasn't much.

Still, the diminutive fellow had one hand on the control switch and the other hung empty. His plasma pistol was at rest on the same belt where he kept his grenades. "You are very fast. Just on time. Come, come, get in and get hidden before you get seen."

'Lygotee about swallowed his mandibles, and lost his eyes from their respective sockets. Traitors! Why? Or was it even that? He decided he could easily decide the fate of the runt if he needed to, but for now the Grunt had just made his life a little easier and he wasn't one to waste opportunity.

Almost at once, he and his team moved through, sealing the door behind them to leave few if any traces. The Grunt had opened it, after all, so if given close scrutiny, it would look as much. 'Lygotee motioned 'Pohamee to a fore position, before taking up one of his own on the other side of the hall. The fighting had driven the sniveling cowards through this sector, and soon they would be funneled his way. If he couldâ€¦|

Sizzle-crack,\_ boom!\_

'Lygotee jumped as he spun, alarmed and spooked from his train of thought. It was rare that 'Lygotee lost his cool, but the sound had been much too closely akin to that of a standard grade plasma grenade going off. He stared in horror at the evidence to just such an explosion, but he hadn't time to consider the mangled body of 'Obaulee and the sagging heap of rent flesh that was 'Lavuree before he realized the little bastard that had let them in was killing them all, without firing a shot. The grenade smacked into his breastplate and adhered there, with a sickening \_puk\_.

Frightened out of his wits, 'Lygotee let his rifle drop to the floor as he clawed at the explosive, tearing it from his armor and scraping the sticky thing from his palm before it detonated. The blast dropped him straight down as it peeled up part of the wall plating, since he was backed into a corner and could not be thrown because of it. His shields crackled across his armored skin, depleted completely, but the mechanism was the least of his concerns. A simultaneous grenade flung to his right had stuck to 'Pohamee, and the Elite now sat slumped against his former cover leaking as much blood perhaps as he owned onto the floor from multiple gaping wounds. He and 'Lygotee had shared the double blast, and for it he felt more than lucky to have lived through it. The Grunt left outside the blast radius of all three now stood just feet from him, unharmed and smiling behind his hydrogen mask.

'Lygotee focused on him, feeling the anger boiling in his veins as he glared the little bastard down. Pain seared through his body as he forced himself from his slouch, seizing the smaller alien in both hands and tearing at his neck until his little head came clean off. 'Lygotee's roar of combined fury, agony, and pain for the loss of his friends echoed both ways down the hall, but the Grunt that evoked it all never heard him.

He tossed the headless body away, then the head after that, before daring to turn and assess the damage and see if any of his teammates had shared his luck. Lowering to a knee, 'Lygotee knew before he touched him that 'Obaulee had not. He might have been sufficiently lucky, however, to miss any undue suffering before he was spent, and for that 'Lygotee could be grateful. Motion off to his side got his attention, and he aided 'Lavuree's attempt to roll over.

"Forerunners be praisedâ€¦ you have survived." 'Lygotee greeted. "Can you stand?"

'Lavuree choked on a mouthful of blood that had gotten in through the wound on his neck, but he managed a nod- if a weak one- and began to pull his badly damaged carcass from the floor. 'Lygotee helped him get upright, but when it became obvious he wasn't going to be able to stay that way on his own, he propped the Elite on the wall before moving- more limping, actually- to where 'Pohamee sat slumped in the corner behind the blast door he had been planning to use as cover when the recognized enemy arrived. 'Lygotee lifted the Elite's head from where it had fallen, and though he was entirely limp and for it had caused 'Lygotee to assume he was dead, 'Pohamee greeted his commander with a silent stare followed by a blink.

'Lygotee smiled, feeling fortunate. It angered him to think a mere Grunt- a \_single\_ Grunt, at that- could decimate his troop so easily. No, they would persevere, continue on and complete their mission, and

emergeâ€| one shy.

His momentary elation faded at the realization that not all of them had survived the surprise attack. In truth it was downright rare to live through a quadruple shock of grenades, let alone have three out of four do it, but the loss of any one of them, multiples aside, was a tremendous crush to the commander. These were his friends, not just his command. He hadn't gotten his black armor lightly, and neither had they.

'Obaulee would be missed.

"Commander." 'Lavuree spoke. His voice sounded raw- possibly from inhaling the injury to his throat.

'Lygotee turned his head, to acknowledge the summons for attention without letting 'Pohamee out of his sight.

"Leave him. The enemy approaches."

'Lygotee knew he was in no shape to fight right now, but he had lingered unmolested long enough for his shields to have recharged completelyâ€| and as much as he wanted to withdraw right then, he could see 'Lavuree was right. Plasma bolts slapped around the corner at the far end of the hall where the Grunts were to come, signaling the drive was about to be upon them. An idea struck 'Lygotee then. They had been betrayed, and thus expected, so there was no real need to conceal themselves though their camouflage worked well enough.

A Human had taught him the trick at Reach. Play dead, be missed, passed up, and there in the middle of the hall was a golden opportunity right before him. It was uncommon tacticsâ€| but if it worked, it worked, and who was to say a functional tactic was a dishonorable one? 'Lygotee let 'Pohamee rest where he was, and moved back to 'Lavuree to help him lower back to the floor without falling; falling would agitate his injuries and possibly make them worse. "Let them come upon you and believe you are dead as doubtless their friend promised them. Do not stir until you have them where you want them."

A little confused, but willing to try it, 'Lavuree nodded his acceptance of the orders. He likely felt as poorly as 'Lygotee did right then, and personally the Commander couldn't blame him. He had a hole in him right next to a major artery and it was a miracle the thing hadn't been perforated. He was just centimeters from bleeding out. 'Lygotee left the Elite where he had found him to begin with and returned to his own respective place, sliding down the wall to ease his own descent to the floor. Once down, and seated where he had been after the dual-blast had cleared, 'Lygotee realized he had encountered a double-edged sword. Now he was downâ€| and he wasn't going to be rising again.

He pressed a hole in his thigh closed while he waited for their prey to arrive, wondering what he had in mind. Shoot them? Word was one of them had swiped a shield generator. Two had been confirmed as having Jackal arm-shields. Unggoy were fragile, as far as how much plasma fire they could take went. These Unggoy, thoughâ€| a feral smile crept onto his withered-up features despite the pain that had curled them.

These Unggoy would never see him coming, and would never know what hit them.

'Lygotee let his eyes rest while he listened to the splash and hiss of the plasma, the choking cries of the Grunts unlucky enough to be hit by some, and the shouts and insults from those pursuing them; One voice he recognized, as it rang loud and clear to his position; "You are a traitor to your race!"

"Down in front!" A Grunt responded.

"Grenade!" The commander Elite called, and shortly after came the explosion to mark the truth in their words.

"Holy light!" Another Elite shouted, but this time the response was more gratifying-

"Ahhh!" The Unggoy wailed. "Get it off me!" \_boom!\_

At the corner, the Grunts made a stand since they had more cover, but after saturating their antagonist's position with more grenades- quite a number of them, 'Lygotee mused- they all turned to flee towards his direction. He rather anticipated them to hesitate long enough to confirm his team was neutralized, but all the passing Grunts did was look at them after the first glance.

"I have a bad feeling about thisâ€|" The Unggoy in the back mentioned.

It was difficult not to smile at the comment.

"Keep up." A comrade told him. 'Lygotee sat forward when the last one had turned his back, and touched a primed grenade too his air tank as he walked away. The Grunt trod a good distance, before noticing he was doomed, but by then the fuse was pretty much spent. Still, he managed to panic and dart for his fellows before it detonated, blowing them all out in all directions from the non-protective sides of their filched shields. Their dying screams were the most satisfying sound 'Lygotee had ever heard, but he realized after all was quiet again that the Unggoy had somehow failed to note the same thing he had; In his master plan, which at that point he wondered how it had worked due to the nature of the flaw, he had forgotten to hide the body of the Grunt that had done his team a number.

How had the other Grunts also fail to notice? It seemed rather unlikely that they assumed he had been killed by being too close to his own grenade volley, as his carcass's only damage was the severance of head from shoulders. He bore no burns or flak at all.

'Lygotee looked at 'Pohamee, who was staring after the blast mark down the hall where all the Unggoy had blown up. "You have done well, brothers." 'Lygotee mentioned, gaining their attention. 'Lavuree lifted his head, to see his Commander, but neither said anything. By the look on his face, though, 'Lygotee knew he needed to get them both to care quickly if he hoped to have either battle-worthy any time soon.

'Lavuree relaxed onto the floor again, with what sounded like a held breath released, right before the team that had been pushing the

Grunts down their direction came upon them. 'Lygotee couldn't find the strength to raise his head, and was grateful he wasn't lying mostly prone like 'Lavuree was, but rather sat up against the wall, so he really wouldn't need to. The Elite at the fore of the newly arrived team looked over the mess, but he had bad senses or something, as the one he knelt beside happened to be 'Obaulee. Seeing the warrior was dead, he assumed the rest- who weren't but looked the part- were, too. Looking up at a fellow Elite past a Jackal, he growled something 'Lygotee didn't catch before saying, "Curses upon these traitors. Go and make sure none are alive- they must pay for the blood they have spilled."

The Elite moved down the hall with four Jackals and two Grunts, leaving the Commander where he was. 'Lygotee caught him looking in his direction, and smiled wanly. "We persist where we may, brother."

The motion he used to close the gap between them seemed more akin to a hop- he rose, moved, and knelt again, this time beside 'Lygotee. "What happened here?"

"I was afflicted with a measure of bad judgment, and we were ambushed."

"Who slew the Grunts?"

"We did." 'Lygotee answered. "After the first fight, we were too badly weakened to face them on our feet so we decided to use our predicament to trick them as they tricked us. It worked."

"I see." He glanced at 'Pohamee, and noticed his gaze was returned. "How many are only pretending to have fallen?"

"Unfortunately, only us three. 'Obaulee is truly dead, and I do not regret anything more than I do that fact."

The Elite looked at him again. "Three?"

"'Lavuree lives still."

"Get your team to the medical ward, Commander, before all of you expire needlessly after the fact." He stood, and met his own team down the hall, where the rent bodies of the renegade Grunts were getting holes burned through them from plasma fire. It was a waste of ammo for some of them, but one actually squeaked, so it proved a necessary measure after all.

'Lygotee leaned to the side, and rested his palms on the floor to try to gain something resembling upright. At first he doubted he would succeed, but with a little determination he did actually manage to get to his knees. From there he could reach the toggle on the wall, and with this he was able to pull himself the rest of the way up. He spent some time resting there to gain a measure of his strength before moving to 'Pohamee to pry the Elite from the floor as well. 'Pohamee, though wounded in more places than 'Lygotee, wound up being the one to pull 'Lavuree aright, and between the three of them, they were able to take 'Obaulee with them when they began the slow trek to the med-ward.

Eventually, somewhere along the way, their luck would end, and the

spree would be over, leaving the team less than operable. 'Lygotee carried 'Obaulee's deadweight like a burden he could never put down. His remaining Elites didn't need to be told to recognize this.

**\*\*Chapter One, part two:\*\***

**\*\*1822 hours; Central Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Enin 'Lygotee paced the hall with a mood bordering on angered impatience. He had been here for more than an hour, and his patience had worn thin. 'Pohamee and 'Lavuree were both in improved conditions, and resting in their personal quarters. He had been trying to summon the attention of the Prophet that was passing through the area, though, leaving no room for such activity.

It wasn't that he didn't find being blown to hell exhausting, he just needed to address an issue he knew would never be taken care of unless the Prophets dictated it so. And it had gone from a mild annoyance to a pressing problem. 'Lygotee paused to consider the color of the wall beside him, but in the end it didn't mean anything- the whole station was the exact same shade, plus or minus a few accessories to the bulkheads. Through a force-field extension, he could see a cruiser drifting into the docking rings, and briefly wondered who was aboard, but he doubted he would meet any of them unless they sought him out.

Something was changing- he didn't like it, and didn't know what it was, but it was happening nonetheless. Finally, the door to the chamber where the Prophet of Mercy had chosen to reside while aboard the \_Radiant\_ slid open, and a chunky brute walked out. He curled his lip at 'Lygotee, who growled in reply. Tensions between the two races had increased, but tolerance seemed to hold, so there was no outright fightingâ€| yet.

'Lygotee had learned to trust his gut, though, and his gut was telling him to prepare for that to be among the changes happening around him. He didn't expect it would become much more than the Grunts' complaints had been, though, and gave it little thought. When he stepped through the door, a panoramic view of the stars and the ships blotting them out in places around the Station's upper quarter came into sight, framing the Prophet that hung in his floater chair in front of the window.

'Lygotee approached, since the Prophet's back was turned, wondering how he could make his case without sounding like an idiot. When he was within twenty paces, the Prophet turned in place, and looked down at him, so he dropped to a knee and bent his head. "Hail, Prophet."

"Rise, Commander." Mercy answered. When 'Lygotee was again upright, he tilted his long spindly neck so his head drifted to the side. The little holographic symbol of the Sacred Ring projected from his headdress twinkled oddly as a star through the window became visible through one edge of it. "I am told you have a complaint you believe is worth the attention of the Prophets?"

"I do, Prophet." 'Lygotee answered.

"Voice it, then, and I shall decide if it truly merits our

attention."

'Lygotee drew a deep breath. Here went nothing- hopefully this didn't wind up on his record and he wasn't branded a fool for life. "It has come to my attention that the Brutes have been granted living spaces near to and among the Sangheili. We do not mean any disrespect, but such arrangements are unacceptable and have made us disagreeable, even hostile, where we were once peaceable and calm. I wished to express my concerns of the arrangement and request changes to it. Will you consider, Prophet?"

Mercy stroked his beaded goatee with the long fingers of his left hand. "Your complaint is recognized as legitimate, yet I am afraid the arrangements made were made to persist- we only ask that you make peace with your brothers of the Covenant, because heresy will have no time for repentance. The Great Journey is nigh."

'Lygotee sighed. Drat. "I will convey your instruction to the others, Holy One."

"See that you do;" Mercy answered, his tone a little on the cold side. "And ensure any dissention is quieted before it can grow, Commander. I am placing this responsibility in your hands."

"Should not such a responsibility belong to the Station Commander?" 'Lygotee protested.

"Are you questioning the will of the Prophets?"

"No!" 'Lygotee answered, hastily, adding slower, "I only wished to know the reason behind such a decisionâ€¦ I do not wish to undermine anyone's authority, yours, his, or the Council of Prophets'. Please forgive this blunder- I did not mean any ill."

"Very well, Commander. You may go." The Prophet's sanguine voice followed him as he left, curling in the air and making him feel less easy about the whole thing. Something was afoot, and he still didn't know what. But he knew he had to make those unaware recognize it, so they might be prepared, even if it proved nothing of dangerous quality. He did know he had learned something useful- and it spelled disaster with a capitalized D if there were no preparations made.

The Prophet of Mercy hadn't answered any of his questions.

'Lygotee walked the rest of the way to the open gardens between the quarters' Commons and the work areas in silent speculation, trying to make sense of the newest development. He passed the corridors near the docking ring and the cargo bays, and paused to consider the activity within each space before moving on.

Brutes dominated both areas. Grunts and Jackals dotted amid their ranks, but it was looking more and more like the Station Radiant had been given to the Brutes' clans for some ulterior purpose that wasn't meant to be at the attention of the Sangheili.

'Lygotee understood one thing clearly enough; the Brutes had just gotten in a shipload of reinforcements, and the Elites were still at their present numbers, mostly unaware though suspecting of the



changes being implemented. It was a frightening prospect- these Brutes were being pressed into the Elite's designated space because their own was filled to capacity and still more had arrived just today.

More disturbing was the fact that the Prophet of Mercy hadn't had a single Sangheili Honor Guard in attendance in the chamber with him- yet the Brute that had greeted him at the door to it had been wearing the signature yellow banner and armor. 'Lygotee made his way across the gardens and past the hydroponics maintenance sector door, noting as he did so yet one more detail about the Brutes in that sector; they were armed, though none were wielding their weaponry just yet.

He knew he couldn't just give a warning and leave it at that- this was becoming serious. Something was happening that the Covenant had decided they didn't want the Elites to know about. 'Lygotee suspected it was something that his people weren't going to like very much, either.

Wondering who all was in on the evident conspiracy, 'Lygotee caught and turned aside a passing Unggoy for questioning. "Why are the Brutes gathering their numbers here?"

The Unggoy looked up at him, a puzzled look on his face. "Me not know."

"What are they doing?"

"Me not sure, Leader!" The grunt scratched speculatively at his head. "Me best guess be they moving munitions to the frontlines."

"Moving munitions?" 'Lygotee asked, a little alarmed by the idea that the Brutes had brought lots of extra ammo with them.

"Yes, Leader." The Unggoy answered. "Lots of boxes of guns and ammunition for the guns. Big guns and small guns and batteries for the small guns."

'Lygotee watched as a Brute walked past, catching the demeaning stare he got from the hulk. Looking down at the grunt, he wondered who would fight for whom when it came down to it. Grunts, while a little headstrong when they became possessed of an idea, had forever been followers of the Sangheili warriors. They didn't much like the way the honorless Brutes treated them. Kig-Yar, on the other hand, liked to fight for whomever they believed would win- never was a Jackal seen that would keep a loyalty to a side that appeared to be losing power. A Kig-Yar would put up with the Brute's treatment if it meant they were on the winning side.

One for one, Brutes did own more physical mass and individual strength than an Elite, but they were prone to tossing aside their weapons of choice in favor of going berserk and mauling their enemies with their bare hands. There was no system, no form to their fighting. Drones of the insectoid Yanme'e also preferred the Jackal way of thought, though it had a few modifications. Luckily, there weren't any of those creatures on the Radiant at present. The insectoid race had all shipped out eagerly enough to the Sacred Ring where they could have front row seats to the Great Journey when it

began.

A good number were reportedly dead already due to the Flood combat forms, though. 'Lygotee was glad he wasn't there in person, confident he wouldn't be missed if he simply held to his honor and loyalties.

"What are they doing with these boxes of guns and ammunition?" The Elite asked. "Are they opening any of them?"

"Yes, Leader- all of them. For inspection." The Grunt replied. He seemed to think he was going to get a pat on the head for the information.

'Lygotee felt inclined to give it to him. "You have done well. Run and gather your Podmates. I want to ensure you are all in fit condition to move if the Prophets call us to join them at the Sacred Ring." It was actually a possibility, though at this point a slim one. He stood still long enough to see the Grunt out of sight, then resumed his walk to the Sangheili quarter, trying to ignore the scrutinizing and condescending looks the Brutes were giving him. He would run them all through on his energy sword if a single one killed one of his brothers.

Still, he could hope it wouldn't come to that. The Covenant had held together for centuries, building races as it sought the Path. The Humans were not the first to suffer the Covenant's wrath, though they had been the first to do something as horrifyingly demonic as destroy a Sacred Ring. The event had shocked even the Brutes- it hadn't crossed their minds as a possible outcome. Before the event, 'Lygotee hadn't even considered the Rings to be a destructible object.

A Brute appeared on the other side when he passed the door to the Sangheili quarter, but here he felt better at ease when there proved more Elites than the unsightly, smelly beasts that had somehow replaced the Honor Guard. He greeted the first that he came close to, but though he was unfamiliar with the fellow's name, he suspected he would know it soon enough along with a million others from across the Station if things became nasty. Sensing 'Lygotee was on a mission of some sort, the Elites that noticed began to gather behind him until he had accumulated nearly all those in the quarter. Those missing were quickly rousing to the unusual event at the beckon of their curious comrades.

When he had all of them gathered in the biggest in-quarter chamber, 'Lygotee turned to face them. "Something disturbing has come to my attention, brothers."

A quiet murmur ran through the crowd. Never had so many Sangheili been gathered in so tight a group before without the presence of a number of one or more of the other races of the Covenant.

"I have spoken to the Prophet of Mercy." 'Lygotee added, keeping his voice level so he wouldn't be seen as trying to rouse them all to start a fight. "He failed to answer a single query I presented him; and the Honor Guard are honorable no longer- the Brutes wear the traditional golden standards."

A faster, more excited murmur followed this announcement.

"A vessel has also docked to this Station within the last hour, and I have seen it's content; Brutes, brothers. Brutes and their favored weaponry."

Silence met this revelation, as the exchanges of converse were abandoned in favor of thought of the information 'Lygotee was giving them. He recognized the looks on many of their faces as the same as what he felt himself- uncertain, uneasy, the feeling of being backed into a corner that had not previously been recognized.

"Do not let them invade your honor without protest. Make the Brutes understand they are not welcome in this quarter. The hives of the Drones are empty- they do not need our space."

"Leader." An Elite in the front spoke. "What are you implying?"

"All I know is something is about to happen- Brutes do not like to congregate in places where their numbers make them crowded. Brutes fight amongst themselves too easily to make such arrangements economical. They are not shipping forward- they are gathering here. Here, brothers. Do you not recognize this? Something is very wrong."

"We do." A second spoke up. "We see them looking at us like we are prey they have been instructed not to kill."

"I have seen Brutes in groups without argument or conflict holding position outside the doors to our rooms." Another added. "They spit at us and act as if we were not honored members of the Covenant."

"We may not be, brotherâ€|" 'Lygotee answered, softly. His words silenced them all, and their expressions turned to doubt, and noncomprehension. "You seeâ€| why would the Honor Guards become Brutes if the Prophets had not decided to exchange the roles of the races? My information is sketchy at best, but I wanted to warn you, brothers- go nowhere without your weapons. I fear a fight may come to us."

"We will not be cut down like worthless curs!" The first Elite shouted, raising a chorus of agreeing growls and snarls.

"Peace, brothers." 'Lygotee added, his tone still soft. "Keep your hearts pure and adhere to your honor. If the Brutes wish a fight they shall get one- but we are above such heretic actions- let them tarnish their own by striking the beginning blow."

"And allow them to kill us?" An Elite wearing blue armor queried.

"Allow, no. A first strike need not be a killing one."

The response was agreeable enough, though 'Lygotee knew the whole thing was just speculation.

"Listen to him." A voice in the back rose up.

Elites turned to view the speaker, curious who would place so much faith in the seemingly mad Elite whose words bordered on heresy even as the rest of them agreed with him.

'Lygotee's mouth opened in complete awe. He could have sworn he was looking at either a perfect copy of 'Obaulee or 'Obaulee himself, but he had seen the unfortunate Elite die and then seen his body after the fact- not to mention it had been disposed of already as well.

"If you put your trust and faith in anything, put it here, brothers." The Elite added. "Brutes have no honor, and they relish the death of anything that is not their own!"

Every Sangheili knew that- but to hear it voiced aloud evidently got their blood boiling, and the words were met with loud cries of agreement. The crowd closed again, and 'Lygotee lost sight of the Elite he thought looked- and sounded, as well- like 'Obaulee, but he knew he couldn't escape very fast if 'Lygotee were to press into the crowd and seek him out.

When he got to the place, though, there was no one of any kind of similarity to what he'd just witnessed. "'Obaulee?" he asked, looking around.

'Pohamee appeared in his peripheral, and he turned to see his teammate. "Leader, 'Obaulee is dead. You know this."

'Lygotee looked back at the scores of Elites surrounding him, but he was forced to nod, and concede the point. He was foolish to think anything else, he knew- he had seen the evidence of the death personally, every last second of the event. Another scan of the crowd turned up 'Lavuree, though, and together the three made their way to the corridor where their personal quarters were.

'Lygotee frowned when they passed not one but three Brutes heading out of the hall. There appeared nothing amiss, though, when 'Lygotee entered his room, so he decided to dismiss it until later. He spared a moment to look at the calm, quiet interior of the space before moving deeper in, able to feel the heartbeat of the \_Radiant\_'s main power cores in the utter and complete silence. He had just begun to remove his armor when he noticed an unusual item that resembled nothing he was familiar with resting on the floor next to the back wall.

Curious, he went to pick it up when he suddenly realized the nature of the item due to a dim light node blinking once on the side. Quickly he withdrew his hand. It wasn't timed- it was rigged to do its thing by another means. Motion? No, he had moved plenty before it without it doing a thing. Heat? That spot was the hottest place on the floor here- so it wasn't heat sensitive. 'Lygotee spent a moment pondering the problem, but ultimately could think of nothing- so he turned back to the door to seek the advice of his teammates, but he paused in revelation when he saw the door panel.

Someone had removed it and put it back. There was glue to hold it in place, and for the slick, almost liquid nature of the glue, the panel had slid somewhat before it could dry. 'Lygotee sighed. Oh, this was good. He had probably triggered a programmed setting on the thing- would it go off if he reopened his door to attempt to escape it? Or would it do so if he even touched the panel's control, regardless of the button's former function? He couldn't be sure- but now he had an idea as for how to circumvent the device. Brutes could be annoyingly

subtle when they weren't going berserk, but they were not especially bright. The allowance for the panel to sag like it had was evidence to this. 'Lygotee reached for the other control the door owned and locked it shut. Then he called 'Pohamee with the comm unit within the matrix of his armor as he donned the parts he had removed.

"Leader?" The signatures of each comm unit always told the receiver who was calling- it helped tremendously when an irritated warrior who wanted to vent was contacted by a superior.

"'Pohamee' are you yet in your quarters?"

"No, Leader."

"I have come upon a problem involving the function of my door. Would you get an Unggoy up here to cut it open? It seems to have seized." 'Lygotee mentioned, casually.

'Pohamee hesitated, but despite his noncomprehension of the situation, agreed anyway, figuring 'Lygotee would explain his rather odd tone considering the circumstances later. First off, why did he want out almost directly after going in? "Yes, Leader. Give me a moment to comply."

'Lygotee wondered how long he would have to wait, but impatience was not a virtue and especially not in this case. While he waited for rescue, he turned to the device on the floor to determine if it was explosive or merely harboring a tank of compressed toxins. If it was explosive, it would make a noise and leave a mess, but the subtleties of the Brutes were limited, so he began to doubt it would merely chase him out gagging on toxic fumes even before he was able to confirm the doubt. 'Lygotee wondered how many other rooms had been booby-trapped like his, and how many had entered them without realizing what he had.

Finally, the comm unit alerted him to an incoming transmission. "Leader. Stand away from the door."

"I am at a safe position from it, 'Pohamee. You may commence work." 'Lygotee responded, standing and turning to see the progress. If it triggered the mine somehow despite, he would have his armor and shields, but there really was no place in the room for him to seek cover from it. Anywhere was as good as the next place, and if it went off, there would be nothing he could do about it at all.

The bright phosphorescent line in the purple metal of his door grew in length slowly and gradually, but the mine on the floor never so much as blinked the little light-node again. When an oval had been successfully cut, the Elite took the shape from the hole and leaned it on the wall of the corridor while the Grunt went about manipulating his gear. 'Lavuree stepped through, and looked at each before speaking. "Someone has attempted to begin the fight I spoke of this night." Stepping aside so 'Pohamee could look in, 'Lygotee extended an arm to the defeated mine on the floor.

'Pohamee's eyes widened. "I have seen just such a device in my own quarters, Leader. I did not get the opportunity to step inside, however' was it responsible for sealing the door?"

'Lygotee shook his head. "No, I did that. After some scrutiny of the

situation I determined it had been wired to the door operations and I feared to open the door a second time would cause detonation."

'Pohamee looked at it, then at 'Lygotee. "Leaderâ€| 'Lavuree and many others have already retired. How do we warn them without causing chaos and without causing some of them to activate their devices?"

'Lygotee contemplated that. "Tell them the corridors have been vented of atmosphere by the Brutes. Tell them to exit their quarters through the air cyclers above the rooms."

"Many will despise these orders, Leader- crawling through an air duct is far from honorable." 'Pohamee answered.

"It is nothing to do with the honor of the Sangheili to remain alive and circumvent the pitiful attempt at cleverness the Brutes have implemented, 'Pohamee- and this is not a strike. It is merely the means by which we will preserve our brothers until we do need a strike." 'Lygotee explained. "Tell them as much if you will. The Brutes have made their moveâ€| now it is our turn to deal."

'Pohamee nodded his head. "Yes, Leader." And with that he began to radio everyone he had numerals for and having them do the ones he didn't. 'Lygotee didn't like the idea of filling the air ducts with Elites either, but it was better than blowing them up while half-awake. There was simply no way of knowing how many rooms had been rigged, and how many would be crawling with the rest needlessly.

After a moment, and some feedback had happened, 'Pohamee turned to 'Lygotee again. "Leaderâ€| they are following your instruction. But they wish to know where they might exit their newfound travel means."

'Lygotee considered that. The lie to send them up there to begin with would complicate thatâ€| but there was one place the Brutes couldn't vent if they wanted to, even though they had yet to do anything of the kind anywhere; Hydroponics. He relayed as much to 'Pohamee. It was a fair enough location, and large enough to hold them all as well. It was also a place that no one would question, because it was only logical to assume such a place had air even if the rest of the \_Radiant\_ did not.

Plants generated atmosphere of their own accord. 'Pohamee sent the information along, aware the Hydroponics chamber was enduring a 'night' cycle where the plants were in partial hibernation as like nightfall on a real planet, and the darkness would mask much of the influx of occupants.

"Leader, we cannot take the Brutes alone." 'Pohamee mentioned, after he had closed the comm channel.

"I am aware of the circumstances, 'Pohamee. Let me think- better, help me think." 'Lygotee replied. "In the meantime, we need to join our brothers in the Hydroponics chamber so they might not see we are in a place that is supposedly air-free."

"Yes, Leader."

"I'm with you." The Unggoy added, enthusiastically.

## 2. Intended Vectors

**\*\*Chapter Two, part one:\*\***

**\*\*2240 hours; Central Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Hydroponics consisted of a single square mile's worth of imported terrain, the soil often more than fifty feet deep. It was unlevel, and in some places, untended, giving it an almost natural forest-like feel. Limbs covered in leaves and some that were bare drooped across what had been a walking-path just three months ago.

'Lygotee remembered walking it, remembered the look of the path it followed through the trees and underbrush. In the center was the largest known species of tree, but it was in the center of a large meadow-like clearing in the middle of the faux forest. It was almost as if a piece of a planet were right down the hall- one of the pluses to being stationed on an orbital platform rather than a cruiser or dreadnaught. At first inspection it seemed huge, yet if one spared the time to explore the whole area it presented itself as being rather small.

'Lygotee had run longer stretches than it could provide while still in training. He had always rather liked the vegetation, yet could never seem to bring himself to linger in Hydroponics for any more time than it took to cross from one door to the next between corridors. Now he stood under the eave of the edge of the chamber, staring out into the thick vegetation with an unreadable look on his face. His lower mandibles clicked once when his reverie was disturbed by motion to his left, but he recognized it quickly enough as the teams of Unggoy he had sent out to practice earlier that evening. The weary grunts were packing it in for the day and hoping to head for their racks in the methane chambers three decks below. He considered stopping them, but if the mines set in the Sangheili quarters were set to go off when the doors opened a second time, then the Brutes weren't liable to expect any fireworks until morning- and a tired grunt was worse in battle than one who merely had bad aim.

He looked away, deciding to let the Unggoy sleep. Tonight the Sangheili would not sleep- Hydroponics was no place to catch one's rest, but scattered hidden amid the trees the Elites had hunkered down, most of them willing themselves to gain as much rest as they could. They all knew that once the fighting started, it wouldn't stop until one side or the other was completely erased from the decks of the \_Radiant\_.

"I thought I would find you here, Leader."

Startled, 'Lygotee jerked out of his half-asleep stupor that he hadn't known he was in. Too much still and quiet would do that to a body, he mused, but he still berated himself for his inability to govern his reactions to his environment. That had been his most defining fault of all, though his quality seemed to have been being the one that was always awake when everyone else was asleep. Tonight appeared the exception.

A soft laugh followed the motions of the black-clad Elite as they sat beside him under the eave. "You shouldn't fight it- you'll need all the rest you can get."

'Lygotee tried to focus on his new companion, but the dark dressage hid them nearly completely from view. Had they activated their camouflage engines he might have seen them better. "You shouldn't be calling me Leader."

He received what he figured was an expressive look, but it was too dark to tell what the expression had been. "I may call you what I will, Commander. It is my right."

'Lygotee nodded- he had to agree with that, at least, as it was a good point. "Leader, then." He conceded. "What brings you to this place at this hour?"

"You did, Commander, or had you forgotten already the pain you fear to feel should your brethren die without opportunity to fight back?"

"I have not forgottenâ€¦ am I permitted to know who you are, or shall you always remain a shadow to me?"

"You ask the questions you know the answers to, yet you never fail to seek the answers to the ones you do not. Tell me, Commander 'Lygotee, why you hold a fondness for a thing you dare not linger near?"

'Lygotee frowned. "I remain where I am taken, and I follow the oath of my fathers." He replied. "I have my Elites and the Covenantâ€¦ and nothing else. Tonight I wonder if I shall keep the last."

His companion spent a moment in reflection. "'Lygotee, Answer me this just once."

'Lygotee looked at him. "Ask." Without knowing who he was speaking with, there was no way he could address them properly, so he didn't even begin to try. If they required a proper address, they would reveal themselves so he might.

"Many Commanders feel a bond of friendship with their teams, yet you have taken yours to a bond likened to that of your kin. Why."

"We are all brothers." 'Lygotee began, but he trailed off before he could add anything else in lieu of the upraised hand he suddenly noticed.

"Did I not ask you to be honest with me, 'Lygotee?"

'Lygotee thought about that. "No."

"Then I make the request now."

He sighed. "What do you expect me to say? We are a team, we function as limbs on a single entity, and we do it well. The loss of one of our number will decrease our efficiency and the loss will be felt for some time to come for thisâ€¦ and other reasons."

"Other reasons?"



"Would you have me fill the night with tales of yester or would you prefer I not answer that?" 'Lygotee asked, feeling a little stressed.

The Elite only nodded. "You asked me why I am here."

"I did." He inclined his head.

"I will answer you. My purpose here was to watch the Prophet of Mercy, and ensure nothing ran amiss. In so doing I was witness to your meeting with him and it piqued my interest." He looked over at 'Lygotee. "I heard your warning to the Sangheili here on the Radiant. I was impressed by your care for the welfare of our kind, even despite the will of all others."

"I am not here to start a fight." 'Lygotee answered, sternly. "We will not betray the Covenant unless it betrays us."

"I fear it already hasâ€¦| brother."

'Lygotee looked back, then. "Explain yourself."

"The Humans have pushed the Prophets to bolster the conflict and many forces were sent to their Homeworld. However you have all been left out of a revolution that occurred within the forward ranks of the Covenant, but it is about to reach for you."

"The influx of Brutesâ€¦|"

"Among other things."

'Lygotee shook himself. This was lunacy! The Brutes were probably just looking for ways to mock Sangheili honor and stability without being blamed outright for unrest in the Covenant. 'Lygotee sighed. As much as he liked the thought, he realized it wasn't quite true, and he could never convince himself that the Brutes would play so nicely.

Elite blood would run before this was over. If 'Lygotee had anything to say about it, it would not run alone. "Your words are heresy, whoever you are." 'Lygotee snapped. "Do not speak them further. I will not be privy to a plan to dismantle the Covenant."

"Plan? What plan? The only ones with plans are the Prophets. The rest of us merely subsist in the fashions we find approachable. You may not enjoy this change, and indeed there is little doubt it will hurt. But it is upon you whether you would be a part of it willingly or not." The Elite answered. "You recall the Demon?"

"I do."

"He returned after the destruction of the first Halo, to the second. There he slew the Prophet of Regret. You may understand how shaken Truth and Mercy were. It is what caused the change of Honor Guards."

'Lygotee wondered whether to laugh at the lunacy or gape in shock. A Prophet was dead? How could that justify using Brutes as guards? They would be as liable to kill the Prophets themselves than wait for the

Demon to do it. "How many of the Honor Guard fell that day?"

"All of them. Every one Regret had in company was killed as well-though we can not know for certain how many were slain by the Demon and how many simply did not get clear of the temple before the Fleet opened its guns on the structure. They flattened it, you know. Trying to kill the Demon. He escaped anyway."

"I have no doubts that he did." 'Lygotee muttered. "He has proven himself many times to be formidable. It was he who cut a swath through our brethren in order to access the means by which he committed his first deed and earned the title of Demon."

His companion smiled. "You don't follow the Covenant blindly, I see."

"How could they justify disbanding the Elites on that?" 'Lygotee asked. "The Demon cannot be stopped by normal means and even the Honor Guard have a limited arsenal with which to perform."

"Such arguments would put you at odds with the Hierarchs, Commander. The Brutes murdered a great number of your kin for such views. The High Council threatened to leave the Covenant, which got the conflict started, but it hasn't ended yet- even though the Arbiter himself was there to bolster the ranks with morale."

"The Arbiter was said to have died already." 'Lygotee mused. "How do you expect to convince me that he lives still?"

"The Great Journey was forestalled by his action alone. The Brutes have lost their Chieftain because the Arbiter killed him."

'Lygotee gave his companion a curious look. "The more words I hear from you the less I like you. And the less I like the situation." He said. "You make heretical claims and blasphemous statementsâ€| but at this hour I feel to call you down would be the deaths of us all. I don't know if what you say is true, but I know the Brutes well enough, and I can see when a thing looms over me."

"Don't ever let that wit go, Commander." The stranger said, as if he were proud of 'Lygotee for some reason. "It'll save your life someday." He stood, and walked away, leaving the Commander feeling mixed and confused. He knew what was likely to happen and what would happen if certain things turned out a certain way, but there was no telling if it would. Just a lot of signs pointing to that it could. Still, he didn't like any of it and the last thing he wanted to get caught up in was a civil war inside the Covenant. Prior to the declaration of holy war on Humanity, things had been relatively quiet. The integration of the Yanme'e into the Covenant had been the biggest thing he could recall.

'Lygotee stared into the trees for a moment, trying to think of what he would do if he ever had to answer for this. If he ever had to explain to half the population of Sangheili why he had gotten them out of their beds at an ungodly hour to rest them in Hydroponics.

Ifâ€| if he lived through this. Something in his gut was telling him how much he needed to stay aware, how this could become so much worse than anyone might anticipate. And he knew if things did get out of

hand there would be no help for it, because in the end they were still going into this with only half their hearts for the fight; many still were undecided whether there would be a fight. No one doubted it was a good possibility, but possibilities never told truth for fact, and the truth was what they so desperately needed right now.

The Brutes had one over them already by the fact that they alone knew whether there would even be the suspected and partially anticipated conflict. 'Lygotee wished 'Obaulee could be there, wished his team were whole. The odds would not be so bad if they were all there. Nothing frightened him when the three were there with him. Sadly he shook his head. 'Obaulee was the last thing he was liable to get right now, and a complete team was out of the picture. Someone new would cause disruption and upset the already chaotic pattern they once had shared. His team had lived up well to the title of Elite; between the four of them, there had been nothing they couldn't accomplish, although their tactics had been something more than normal.

Adaptation had come in the form of 'Obaulee. The Sangheili had taught the rest of them what the meaning of improvisation was. There had not been anything quite like 'Obaulee. 'Lygotee ran his taloned fingers along the armor on his mandibles, remembering the last mission they had done together. One tiny misstep had doomed them all. Everything had gone very wrong very fast and even before the mission objective was in sight. 'Lygotee hadn't let a moment pass that he hadn't thought of what things would be like if he had simply greeted the traitorous Unggoy with a plasma bolt to the face. The event made him question his leadership quality, but 'Pohamee and 'Lavuree only leaned on him more, as if 'Obaulee had been a crutch removed at a bad time, leaving them only one person left to support them.

He didn't believe he was worthy of their loyalty anylonger, but at this point to retire would be a bad thing. And even if he managed somehow to pull that off, he would only be kicking himself more when the news reached him later of the systematic annihilation of all Sangheili aboard the Radiant.

'Lygotee began to consider what might become of them all if they did happen to defeat the Brutes and persist despite any conflict. Would the Great Journey leave them behind? Or did that matter anymore? If they were all dead before it happened the same outcome was assured. What was the point? 'Lygotee didn't want to die, but it wasn't beneath him to dedicate it to a worthy cause. For the longest he had assumed the Covenant was that cause. Yet the more time passed the more he came to realize that everything he had known or thought he'd known had all been a lie.

The Covenant was crumbling around him, and no amount of dedication or blood could seal it back together. The Sangheili were being evicted, eradicated—erased.

'Lygotee spent a moment in reflection, contemplating the patterns of action they could take when the conflict began and the shooting started. How many would die? How many would never know if their efforts were for good or in vain? How many more would sacrifice everything for nothing? Who would see the end? Who would be able to forgive him, when it was all said and done, after many of their brothers had died and all that remained was a blood soaked

truth?

"Let go." 'Lygotee turned his head, curious who had spoken. At first he wasn't sure if it was even addressed to him, but the Sangheili standing beside him was facing him. 'Lygotee blinked. How oddâ€ behind the Elite were the sands of the desert following the borders of a plain where the Academy was. He remembered the place as being where he had stood just before graduation, trying to make sense of something that so many years later he still didn't understand. Cloaks snapping in the stiff, hot wind, the two of them had stood there overlooking the sweeping desert for several hours. No one came to them, complained about them missing time in the school.

'Lygotee shook himself. Eighty years ago that day he had been here, and here he stood again. It occurred to him it wasn't likely to be real. Was he that exhausted? Doubtful. He'd only missed a few hours of sleep total. A day shy of his deployment to join them, his bloodline had been completely wiped out. All the Sangheili bearing any relation to him were gone in the blink of an eye, and all that remained of the contingent of vessels was glitter in the cosmic picture. Even the Prophets hadn't known what had happened, but they quickly found out- all the scout and recon vessels sent to investigate suffered similar fates until they figured out the space was booby trapped by natural anomalies. It was a no-fly zone found the hard way.

'Lygotee stood very alone against all that could be thrown his way and he knew it. Right there facing the open, empty expanse of desert, he had never felt it more. The memory revived told him the feeling had returned. He had worked hard to forge his surrogate family, and now it was slowly being stripped from him, too. 'Obaulee was only the first. 'Lygotee could only wonder, wait and fear.

After they were gone, what was left?

'Lygotee turned from the sight, but there was nothing else to look at, nothing there but the individual beside him rendered in fuzzy detail. He lowered his head, and closed his eyes. Eventually, a similar fate would be dealt him and on that day he would define whether he should be remembered or forgotten, the last of his bloodline and the sole survivor of the biggest catastrophe known to the Covenant Archives. A million lightyears could never be enough space between him and that looming shadow on his heart. He had known a number of them- cousins, parents, uncles and aunts, a sibling and their mate.

It was all gone.

'Obaulee was gone.

'Lygotee had never felt more alone.

**\*\*Chapter Two, part two:\*\***

**\*\*0215 hours; Central Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Enin 'Lygotee shot to his feet, the hiss and spit of his energy sword coming active in his grasp alerting a pair of Sangheili to his left. He looked around, wondering where he was, before his posture straightened and he touched the power stud on the sword again.

He ran a hand over his face, and sighed. Nightmares. He always had a few, but now was not a good time. How could he expect to rest if they woke him every few hours? He checked his arm-chrono, and frowned. It was early enough to catch the dead asleep. Shaking his head at the frustration, 'Lygotee decided to walk for a stretch before doing anything else. His method of arousal had left his system shot up with adrenalin, and for it he knew he could never go back to sleep.

Casting the Elites to his left a look, 'Lygotee decided to go right; he didn't need to have any close encounters with anyone who might want to talk to him, and he didn't feel up to answering a query after his health. Aside from the content of his dreams, he was fine, and if that wasn't obvious he wasn't going to answer it. What troubled him was the fact had been easily concealed from the others until now. Here they could all gather like an audience and see him fly from sleep into a battle-ready stance without prompting, and ridicule him for it. He often couldn't remember what in the dreams woke him like that, but when he did he put it out of his mind in favor of other things. Any Sangheili warrior worth his salt would never show weakness.

'Lygotee followed the outer walk around Hydroponics, trying to soothe his nerves and regain his frazzled composure. If his team saw him like this, they would doubt his ability as a fighter. He hated not being able to gain any decent rest in his own quarters, but there was no way he was sleeping with a mine primed to blow right beside him. As he walked he slowly worked out the cramps in his shoulders, borne of resting in his armor and sitting up. He'd had worse, and less, but here he didn't need to. It irked him to be so constrained by such a pathetic yet unmeetable foe, powerless to solve the problem.

He paused by the air vent that took atmosphere from Hydroponics and sent it through the rest of the station, and studied the reflective metal grill over the hole. The latches were open, likely because they had been forced open and couldn't be closed again due to the push without some similar force. 'Lygotee looked from the grill reflecting the twilight star shine through the open windows above the trees to the wall beside it.

The fleet standard purple looked a silvery grey under the dim light, but if he studied it long enough he could tell it wasn't really grey at all. Looking past his armor-clad thighs at his hooves, 'Lygotee studied the dirt on his boots. It was only enough to make his otherwise clean armor look spotty where it was covered by unreflective soil, but it made a pattern of interest. Hearing movement to the side, he looked up to see a Sangheili leave the treeline and walk past his position as if he had his cloaking engine active. 'Lygotee knew better than to assume they didn't see him, though. All Sangheili had excellent senses, and he was also standing against a reflective wall- at the very least, he was rendered as a silhouette.

This did not appear to deter the fellow from ignoring him, though, but it wasn't as if that bothered him- however the proximity did, and he resumed walking. 'Lygotee wasn't a large Elite, but he was tall- which gave his frame the false appearance of being overtly thin. He was light on his hooves, quick with action and reaction, and lithe as an athlete. Though it hurt to perform such a task, he knew he was

capable of bending himself nearly double backwards- a fine quality if only under certain circumstances. 'Lygotee folded his hands behind his back as he paced, thinking and trying to compose a comprehensive plan if the Jiralhanae- though better known as Brutes in 'Lygotee's opinion- ever found them before all of them could waken and be ready.

The pensive Elite strode after the sound of soft breath on foliage, aware more than half had been more successful at getting a few more hours of rest than he. He didn't need to awaken them too early. They would need all the rest they could get if things turned south. He found a broadleaf tree to stand under, and stared into the forest, speculating how many were actually present; they were too numerous to be revealed by a single scan of the trees, yet he doubted there were that many more besides. Sensing a presence beyond the sightline approaching, 'Lygotee held to the Plasma Rifle still clipped to his hip and stepped forward, cautious of finding a Brute.

"You often remind me of a frightened youth when you're nervous, Leader." 'Lygotee recognized the voice instantly and turned to see his effort had been thwarted by his teammate. He wasn't that surprised. 'Lavuree had always been one notch above his skill at stealth, but the best thing he was good at was his ability to make someone that was on to him believe he was several feet from his actual location. The quality had stayed his life on numerous occasions.

"And you remind me of a flightless bird seeking the sky in a panic when you are." 'Lygotee replied, tartly. "You know I am far from at ease this hour, 'Lavuree- why do you torment me so?"

The Elite folded his hands behind his back and shrugged, though he remained expressionless. "Is it unwise to test one's Leader for sureness before a battle we may or may not see? You are so wound up it hurts just to watch you walking."

'Lygotee tilted his head. "Why would that be a problem? My ability does not wane under pressure. You have witnessed that personally."

"Yes, Leader. But it never hurts to be certain- your words, I believe."

'Lygotee scowled at him, but he couldn't protest. Indeed they were his own words, and 'Lavuree was right, again, about that reflection 'Lygotee was casting. The Commander had some problems, not just faults, and every once in a while, they would show their ugly heads for all the Covenant to see. Though possessed of an efficient team and owning good proficiency himself, and having few if any failed missions under his belt, 'Lygotee had been slow to climb the rank ladder because he was considered unstable. No one could know, not even him, when that instability would wreak its havoc.

He didn't have a problem with fear- he had learned long ago how to deal with and master its influence, along with all his other instincts. Fight and flight had been killed, in favor of calculation and execution. Panicked frenzies accompanying instinctual reactions had become very unhealthy for him while still in training. But the onset and timing of his internal struggles unsettled him. How would he know if he needed to withdraw? He knew one thing, though.

Eventually, it was going to spell his doom, and there was no amount of aid from his team that could save him.

"Why are you up so early, Leader?" 'Lavuree asked. "Your wandering has awoken several of the others who feared your footsteps belonged to a Brute."

'Lygotee had no excuse. "I am up because I wakened and could sleep no longer. This waiting has destroyed my nerves and I fear to be numb for a week."

'Lavuree laughed softly, amused by the joke. "Leader, even if you cannot sleep you may do well to preserve what energy you have. Find a comfortable place and sit down."

'Lygotee frowned up at the skylight. "I am far too restless to pull off such an action. Surely you recognize that."

'Lavuree took his shoulder in hand, catching his gaze. "Leader." His voice had an edge to it- he was pressing his luck by attempting to give a higher ranking officer an order, and more so by trying to enforce the command. But it was a legitimate request- and 'Lavuree had pointed out he was doing what he had not wanted to by wandering; waking the others. He had a point, and a prominent one.

'Lygotee brushed the hand down, but nodded. 'Lavuree had never done him wrong. He could forgive this once. "I will find a place to sit."

"Thank you, Leader." 'Lavuree stepped back, allowing his Commander room to move, and watched as he paced silently away, aware that 'Lygotee was stressed indeed to have let such an encounter pass without comment. He feared his kind might never know retaliation if a fight broke out. But beneath that he worried more that he had caused such a fight, and carried the wondering sadness that if that be the case, how he might atone for it, or if anyone would ever forgive him at all.

'Lavuree understood the position took more strength than he had to hold up against it. The massive weight would crush him, but 'Lavuree knew not how to help or what would become of his Commander after the fact.

Four hours passed without a single incident, but hardly any who had come awake had been able to go back to sleep. The Hydroponics bay had begun to shift, the occupants restlessly stirring and becoming slowly active in the light of the new day. The star the station's orbit was around glared brightly into the trees, shining through the overhead windowpanes. It was a translucent metal, though, not any sheet of silica. Glass was far too fragile to use on hull side placements in the deep cold of space. The tiniest micrometeorite would shatter the whole pane.

'Lygotee met 'Pohamee at the fourth sector door, but only because he had seen his teammate there and walked the distance to share a few words. "Morning never looked so blasted grim." 'Pohamee commented, after his Commander had come to a stop.

"Ah, yes. Not all mornings are good as we would wish." 'Lygotee agreed.

"What do we do now, Leader? Many would do best to have their armor systems with them- and most do not. And I myself am fighting a losing battle against hunger."

'Lygotee smiled. "Easy, 'Pohamee. Back through the air ducts, one or two, to collect and retrieve then distribute the armor they left in their quarters, and when we are all suitably armed, we may traverse this Station to the Resource Chamber for the meal you crave." He picked absently at a bracer. "I admit to wanting to eat too."

'Pohamee smiled at him. "That, Leader, is because you are mortal, you are Sangheili, like the rest of us."

'Lygotee gave him a playful frown. "I never pretended to be more than those things. I am no god nor shall I ever aspire to be. Gods have to keep people that hate them."

'Pohamee gave him an interested look. "Hate them?"

"For every religion there are heretics, unbelievers, and infidels. It is a function of life to be this way." 'Lygotee answered. "So some or most honor them- alright, what to do with the dissenters?"

'Pohamee laughed. "Continue your speculation, Leader- I will dispatch runners for the armor and explain the morning's plan to the rest."

'Lygotee nodded his approval, and watched as 'Pohamee left at the same pace that 'Lavuree approached. "Is this door one of those we wish sealed and guarded, Leader?"

'Lygotee turned to look directly at 'Lavuree before answering. "That question you should ask of 'Pohamee- this was where he stood before I gave him instruction."

"I understandâ€|" 'Lavuree gave the door some study before looking again at his Commander. "I might inquire as to your master plan for this day."

"I have none." 'Lygotee admitted. "I hope to rely upon the witness and thought of these Elites in the hours to follow."

"What of the others? The Unggoy are not a part of this unrest we are feeling."

"I have a suspicion they may wish to help resolve it, despite that- the Unggoy have no love for the Jiralhanae. Perhaps in them we may invest an ally."

"Maybe, Leader, it would be best to leave them out of it."

"While I see that as an option, 'Lavuree, I do not doubt if the Brutes decide to cause a fight between us the Kig-Yar will join them."

"What makes you so sure of this, Commander?" 'Lavuree asked.

"I was merely voicing a hunch, 'Lavuree. Do not presume to take my



words as fact." 'Lygotee advised.

"Yes, Leader."

"How fare the Sangheili this morning?"

"I have heard more lines poised in jest than ire, Leader- some joke how long it has been since they had slept on real soil, others at their histories with insects."

'Lygotee nodded his approval. "Good, they are amiable. This will stall any disturbances within our own at least for now."

"There was one I thought we should keep an eye on, though, Leader." 'Lavuree mentioned. "A Watchman, called Domavai."

"Domavai? How interestingâ€¦ I had not known there were any aboard the Radiant with so little field experience."

"His honorific is misleading, I might note." 'Lavuree mentioned.

"How?" 'Lygotee looked at his teammate curiously.

"While he has seen no battle, Domavai has been credited with the deaths of not one but two Lekgolo that presumed to fire up at the balcony where a squadron of Sangheili and Unggoy stood. He isn't unproven."

"I see."

"At report, he had no weapon with which to meet them."

"You wanted to watch this one? Why? He seems perfectly capable to me."

'Lavuree cast his Commander a look 'Lygotee found unreadable.

"Leader, he strikes me as one we may not be able to rely upon under great stress. I wanted you to be aware he may not live up to old standards as there are some things that can only be done once. He may be the kind of Sangheili nothing wants to mess with- I do not discount that. But he may very well be the kind of untrainable youth that gets by on meager grades and the actions of his fellows to see him through. He has accomplished something of note, it is true. But I do not see him as a great asset and we do not need to mistake him when it matters."

"So noted." 'Lygotee acknowledged. "Who can we rely upon, then?"

'Lavuree gave the sifting crowd of Elites a glance. "I do not know their names, Leader. You may need to see to that yourself, as I am not renowned for my character judging ability."

"Very well." 'Lygotee stepped from the door, but that was all he did. An Elite clad in blue armor followed by one in yellow stepped up, blocking his way. 'Lygotee looked first at the blue-clad, then the yellow. "Supreme Commander." There was only one aboard the Radiant that wore golden armor. Though he was honestly surprised to see him here; the Supreme Commander didn't bunk with the rest of the

Sangheili in that quarter, as he had his own.

"You have some explaining to do, Enin 'Lygotee."

"I would gladly answer any and all questions you have, Supreme Commander." 'Lygotee inclined his head in the superior's direction. Looking back at the Supreme Commander's escort, he greeted the fellow with a curious look. "Do you require something of me also?"

"Not before the Supreme Commander." He wisely decided, stepping aside. Now it was clear the one had not been following the other, but merely aiming for the same destination a step behind. 'Lygotee nodded to him.

"You may consult with 'Lavuree here if it is not urgent or a private matter. I will hear of it when the Supreme Commander has finished with me." Turning to the aforementioned, 'Lygotee added, "Do you require private discussion or does the current location please you?"

The Supreme Commander eyed him for a moment, before deciding. "We will speak alone; come with me." 'Lygotee didn't hesitate when the superior officer turned away, keeping stride a step to his right and rear- following leadership yet not surrendering completely his own authority by being off to the side a little rather than fully behind. 'Lavuree watched them go, able to tell by the direction they were headed that the Supreme Commander was going to use the foyer to his personal quarters as the mentioned private area.

He looked at the blue-clad Elite they had left behind, then. "What is your name and rank?"

The Elite stiffened to an attentive posture. "Hoku Zimivee, Field Master."

"And what did you need the Commander's attention for?"

"There is air in the corridors again. But there have also been reports of four out of five of the quarters erupting in unexplainable explosion upon opening of the doors."

"He knew this. Had you used the air shafts like he instructed, you would not have needed the doors and not triggered the mines. The loss of atmosphere in the corridors was a ruse intended to maintain order while the majority of you were only half-aware."

The Elite pondered that. "And to discourage usage of the doorsâ€¦"

"Exactly. Do you see now what happens when you disobey an order?"

Zimivee frowned, but pensively, not irritatedly. "Yes, Leader. I will relay this to the others." He looked up to meet 'Lavuree's gaze. "Leader?"

"Dismissed." 'Lavuree watched him go, noting the nature of his stride. Apparently he didn't much like the turn of events, but he wasn't too pleased with his brothers who had dared open their quarters' doors, either. Satisfied, 'Lavuree turned his gaze out to

the entrance to the corridor that his Commander had disappeared into.

'Lygotee had handled the situation here smoothly, and he was good at keeping his cool, even in surprise, but in private the Supreme Commander could roast his cool without stirring the other Sangheili and possibly get a reason to depose 'Lygotee entirely.

Currently all that 'Lygotee heard was silence, though. He watched as the Station's highest ranking officer walked a few paces away and turned to face him fully from that distance. 'Lygotee never let his shoulders relax, never let his gaze wander. He knew he was here for something less pleasant than he might have liked.

"Tell me something, Commander." He was older than 'Lygotee, but it only showed as hardened features, not softened or sagging ones. Age could not defeat this Elite- it would take something less subtle.

"Yes, Leader."

"Why have all my Elites spent the night in the Hydroponics bay? What meaning is this? What are you up to?"

"I only had their well being in mind, Leader. The Brutes laid mines in our quarters, but I was the first to notice. So I made sure none were harmed by evacuating the Sangheili quarter entirely."

"The Brutes laid mines in your rooms? Why? Brutes prefer to watch when their prey dies- even more prominent is the preference to become lathered in the prey's blood."

"I believe they meant to thin our ranks before doing that, Supreme Commander." 'Lygotee added. "Brutes love to do the things you mentioned, it is true. But Brutes have no honor, and they do not like to die to feel the power the action gives them."

"You believe they mean to start a fight? You have lost your mind. I will have you removed of your head for this lunacy."

'Lygotee's features tightened, but he held his pose. "If you wish proof of my claims, Supreme Commander, I can show it to you myself. You are renowned for your wisdom and wit. Do not fail your reputation now when it counts most."

The Supreme Commander gave him a dissatisfied look, but he obliged by opening a comm channel to another Elite- though he meant to speak first, the noise that came through the device drowned him out and rewrote the expression on his face.

"Move away from there!!" The words were shouted so loud they were quite audible over the following explosion and subsequent scream of combined surprise and pain. The Supreme Commander cast his glare at 'Lygotee.

He grimaced. "I had hoped they would not encounter thatâ€¦"

"What have you done??"

'Lygotee looked the Supreme Commander in the eye. "Not half what I

had hoped. That they have set the mines off is testament to that, Supreme Commander. Humor me this day. The Jiralhanae mean ill for us, and I only meant to prepare our brothers for that." He spread his hands. "What would you have of me, Leader?"

\_"Don't move, this will hurt."\_

The Supreme Commander grunted. "We will see if you are right. If you are, you will be rewarded for your foresight and planning in advance." He said. "If you are wrong, I shall kill you myself." He cast his gaze over the Elite before him. "Why are you carrying a sword?"

"It belonged to my forefathers. My fifth great grand forefather built it himself." 'Lygotee answered. "It was given to me when I entered the Academy, Leader."

"That explains why it is so odd looking."

\_"By the Prophets. Stop! I told you not to move. Your blood will fill all the perforations in the floor."\_

The Supreme Commander looked at his comn unit, and switched it off. "I assume you have a method of determining the nature of the placement of theseâ€| 'mines'."

"I witnessed three Brutes leaving before noticing the mine, Leader. It was only a logical conclusion."

"Why would the Brutes attack us? We are part of the same Covenant." He waved loosely. "And the Prophets would never condone such wanton actions aimed at its destruction, considering how much time they put into building it."

"I spoke with the Prophet of Mercy yesterday. He revealed nothing of anything and denied me the answers to the questions I presented. He thought it reasonable to leave me with a little religious advice as enough."

The Supreme Commander gave him an unreadable look. "You spoke to him yesterday? At what time?"

"Evening, Leader."

"He must have left almost directly after seeing you, then. The Prophet of Mercy is already arriving at the Sacred Ring."

'Lygotee found he was somehow unsurprised. Of course the Prophet had only been passing through. They didn't like to be near any real conflict- and even if he hadn't condoned it, perhaps he sensed it and had moved on as fast as his ship could refuel. That had been the only real reason for the stop to begin with. 'Lygotee stared at the Supreme Commander without seeing him. There would be bloodshed, but it wouldn't run pure. Of that he was certain. Creatures of the Covenant from all walks of the galaxy would be there when it began. Perhaps there would be a cease-fire after a time, but it could never happen fast. 'Lygotee understood that.

Even the Supreme Commander understood that.

**\*\*Chapter Two, part three:\*\***

**\*\*0845 hours; Central Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

In the span of a few short minutes there seemed an eternity had conspired to pass. If he had known that it had meant to try a stunt like that, 'Lygotee would have tried to compensate. For now, though, he could only improvise and move on.

"Leader, look here."

'Lygotee turned, to see an Elite he had never spoken with before addressing him. He dismissed the question of identity to see what was in reference. At the door's seams there could be seen a stripe of lumpy, oddly- textured metal, following the outline if where the parts of the door would separate when it opened. He gave it an interested look. Many Elites had already gone beyond this point, but it wasn't evident why this door had been sealed shut. It was a side passage, one of perhaps hundreds that went to the same destination from various points. Still, it was worthy of note considering that destination might be where the Brutes were doing something. He extended a hand, and touched the end of a claw to the weld, but it proved old- it had long ago cooled and gotten hard again. The door was sealed. 'Lygotee looked at the Elite that had pointed it out.

"Why would they seal this door? To keep us out of there they would be welding doors all day."

"I don't know, Commander." He responded, studying the scene ponderously. "I just noticed this was the fourth door that looked this way."

'Lygotee paused. "The fourth, you say?"

The Elite met his gaze, and nodded. "Yes, Leader."

Bile welled in his throat. A trap. Again. He touched the activation switch on his comm, but it wasn't tightband. Anyone with an operating comm would hear. "Move with caution, brothers. Something else isn't right this day. Keep your weapons and your wit primed."

"The Brutes probably heard that, Leader." The Elite beside him mentioned.

"I do not care if they did." 'Lygotee muttered, giving the sealed door a contemptuous look. "The arthropods won't know what to make of it anyway. They have doubtless made more preparations than this, and cannot know to what I refer."

He received a muted nod in reply. The Elite didn't even react to the reference to the invertebrate name. Hardly anyone would have protested the accusation. Maybe the Jiralhanae would know, maybe they wouldn't. But everyone had their armor and weapons with them, as well as there being more than seven in proximity. Hundreds all filed to the Resource Chamber, following the same hall. 'Lygotee met up with more than half the \_Radiant\_'s compliment of Sangheili warriors, when he reached the Resource Chamber. Still more were coming in. The room was large enough to accommodate them all, but it hadn't been meant to service them all at the same time. It was meant to handle multiples

of species, though, which was why it was as big as it was.

'Lygotee paused to survey the shifting mass of Sangheili, and found himself awed for the first time since he left the Academy for the fleets of the Covenant. They were magnificent. Each tried and capable, hardened and sure warriors who had each seen enough and some of them too much. 'Lygotee tried to pick out the one 'Pohamee had mentioned with the honorific vai, but after several minutes gave up and surmised he might still be enroute. If he was as green as 'Pohamee said, he didn't show it in the way he carried himself if he really was there already.

'Lygotee spotted his teammates, but before he could consider joining them he spotted the Supreme Commander again, and wondered if the effort would be worth it. The officer had made himself quite clear that anything wrong would be on his head- if it was a heavy load his head would lose its hold on his shoulders.

Shaking it with a sigh, 'Lygotee made for familiar company anyway. There could be nothing to help what happened, though at this point he was reluctant to address it as an if anymore. The Brutes meant something- and it wasn't nice.

After he had gained a meal and sat with it to eat, the first of the Unggoy began to arrive, though there were still no sign of any Kig-yar anywhere yet. 'Lygotee watched as the still bleary-eyed grunt toddled over to the food nipples suited to his kind. The Elite had become accustomed to the varying methods by which the creatures of the Covenant consumed sustenance, and found the actions easy to ignore. Slowly the little creatures accumulated and on occasion got underfoot of the bigger Sangheili. This always caused a commotion, but 'Lygotee could only smile. The five-foot Unggoy were always the ones under the hooves of the seven-foot Sangheili, though usually this had nothing to say about who was knocked down for the encounter.

Small though they might be, there was no pull quite so strong as that an Unggoy could deliver when his little foot was caught under something heavy. And there were few who could take a sudden removal of their footing with grace.

Several got into arguments, but these were short-lived, as the Sangheili were expecting a fight with the Brutes and understood the Unggoy were not their enemies. The Unggoy, for their part, were not terribly inclined to argue with an Elite, and abandoned the tirade as soon as it became apparent they could.

Still, there wasn't an Unggoy who didn't have an opinion, which enabled the argument to start to begin with. 'Lygotee watched as the milling crowd of his kind began to sift away from the rows of food nipples, unwilling to continue that activity, which though was slightly uncharacteristic of normal Elites, pleased the Unggoy, who could now breakfast in peace- relatively speaking. 'Pohamee moved in his peripheral, catching his attention, but though the Elite said nothing, he was wearing an amused smile. What piqued 'Lygotee's interest was the fact that it wasn't directed at the events surrounding the Unggoy at all. 'Pohamee was smiling because of 'Lygotee.

"What?" 'Lygotee asked, petulant.

'Pohamee just shook his head, mandibles snapping in a gesture of dismissal. "Nothing, Leader."

'Lygotee knew better, but he knew it wasn't worth pursuing too, so he let it rest at that. 'Lavuree, for one, was wearing the same expression. He, though, was wisely trying to conceal it with a clever guise of focusing the look at his food. 'Lygotee shook his head at his companions, and finished his own meal. When each had finally finished, he spared them each a look. "Ideas?"

"Leader?" 'Pohamee asked, puzzled.

"I was alerted to the fact that the doors along the corridor to get here are all sealed shut. I doubt each and every one of them can have hull breaches beyond them, so the Brutes must wish to funnel us somewhere. Ideas?" 'Lygotee elaborated.

"I noticed that. I also noticed they missed two doors which I thought were mistakes until I realized I knew what was beyond each of them- very strategic." 'Lavuree mentioned. "I don't think the Brutes are that good at planning ahead, though, Leaderâ€¦ I have seen them. They don't know the first thing about welding or brazing. My guess is they got the Kig-yar to do it."

"Or they got the idea from the Kig-yar to begin with and simply took it to give it back." 'Lygotee added. "What can we do to counter that?"

"Standard grenades don't even mar the laminate on the walls, Leader." 'Lavuree mentioned. "We would need to have something bigger and more heavy to open them again. But if we did it would destroy the Brutes' plans to force us down a certain route- not to mention they forgot to post guard to make sure we don't pop them open while they aren't lookingâ€¦"

'Lygotee nodded. "Good so far."

"Brutes, post guards? That requires forethought that involves actual cognitive ability. Brutes that can pilot starcraft are rare. Brutes that can come up with a plan without help don't exist." 'Pohamee stated.

"Perhaps, 'Pohamee." 'Lygotee said. "But don't underestimate them- though I agree we should consider the Kig-yar more carefully."

"We are in the company of many brilliant minds, Leader." 'Lavuree mentioned. "We should run these things by each of them."

"Who did you have in mind?" 'Lygotee asked.

"The one who came to speak to you before the Supreme Commander called you away- Hoku Zimiveeâ€¦ a Field Master. I also spoke with Avin SzÄ™naqee and his Commander, G'vil 'DÄ™thumee. They all struck me as merely needing the prompting to devise stratagems with which to subdue the Brutes completely."

"They have laid mines in our quarters and spilled Sangheili blood." 'Pohamee snarled. "They will pay for that. I will not be satisfied with their mere subdual."

"Are you willing to sacrifice the honor of your entire bloodline for this vengeance?" 'Lavuree asked, his own tone unforgiving. "We are not going to cause another Uprising and be hung by our entrails for heresy!"

"Peace, brothers, we needn't fight amongst ourselves." 'Lygotee said. "Brutes are what they are and will never be anything but. We on the other hand have potential and capacity to grow beyond pettiness. But ultimately I am forced to agree with 'Pohamee. The Brutes started thisâ€¦ but we will end it."

"Forgive my intrusion, brothersâ€¦" An Elite said, nearing their table. "But I heard you speak my name and wondered if you meant to call my attentionâ€¦"

'Lygotee looked up at them. "Which would you be, then?"

"I am Zimivee, Leader."

"Ahâ€¦ I recognize you now. You pointed out the welding."

"Yes, Leader."

"We didn't call for your attention. But now that we have it, you may join us in our deliberations concerning the situation. 'Lavuree tells me you are recommended as an able thinker to add to the pool of thought as for what we may do and how we might do it in light of recent events." 'Lygotee extended an arm to a seat that was as yet untaken.

Obligingly, though unsure if he could provide in this new duty, Zimivee moved to the seat and sat down. "Continue without me, brothers- I have nothing at this time to contribute and can only give insight on what I am already certain has not been hashed to death already. I would also appreciate knowing what ideas have already been discarded."

"Very well- a wise approach, I might say- so listen carefully." 'Lygotee told him.

"What if nothing else happens?" 'Pohamee queried. "It could be they will wait for us to make the first move. As much as I wish to crush them I am not that easily goaded into foolish action."

"They have already begun, 'Pohamee." 'Lygotee mentioned. "We have three dead brothers and five injured ones just from this morning."

"So are we going in?"

"I somehow doubt the wisdom of that option." 'Lavuree added, speculatively. "I don't intend to allow them to whittle us down little by little, but I doubt they can resist open combat for long either. As for us, I am unsure how to proceed, but I am certain that heading into their nest would be bad. We could take it, I suppose, but it seems to me it would be a victory bought at too high a price. Look how much preparations they've done where we were watching them. There is simply no knowing what to expect when going into there."



"I like your point. Well made, 'Lavuree." 'Pohamee mused. "But while it tells us what not to do, it still leaves us no direction on what to do."

"I confess I had no intention of trying to add anything of that nature to my explanation." 'Lavuree said. "Primarily because I have nothing in the department to give."

"I have a pretty good idea where they've holed up most of their numbers." 'Lygotee said. "I found a problem with the location almost as soon as it became obvious as where they were. There would be no way short of divine intervention that we could enter without being bottlenecked and wasted in the doorway."

"Stealth."

The three who had been speaking at length turned to regard the input.

Zimivee looked at them each in turn. "Stealth. Is it not obvious, brothers? If we cannot meet them in battle on the floor where they stand, then we must seek another route. You gave us the idea when you routed us from bed last night, Leaderâ€¦ I hadn't known until then that I could fit in those places."

'Lygotee and his team exchanged glances. "How would this plan be executed?" 'Lygotee asked.

"Well, not everyone can be up there. It would be backed up all over the station and the drop in airflow would alert them and render the effort moot. If we did follow their funnel with a few of our number to instill the thought that their poor plan had worked, then they would be distracted enough to allow any covert operations to go off without a hitch."

"You're implying something. Elaborate." 'Pohamee stated, his eyes narrowing.

"They're holding all the munitions, you see." Zimivee clarified. "They have the corridors to the armory and the bays sealed off- they brought a lot of munitions with them so both places will be rich in weaponry and ammunition. We will run shy faster than they will because they do tend to be capable of taking more damage before dying."

"He's right." 'Lygotee mentioned. "I hadn't thought of thatâ€¦ you see what wisdom you hide from us, 'Lavuree?" His accusation was in jest, though it was also genuine, and was accompanied by a light push on 'Lavuree's shoulder.

'Lavuree just clicked his mandibles in mock irritation.

"What do we do as for the ones that want to kill them all without bother for tactical value?" 'Pohamee asked. "I noticed at least one of them thinks like these Brutes would be easy kills if someone would just grant him a sword."

"He isn't getting one." 'Lygotee said. "It comes as simple logistics. Some of us are still bitter. I find that understandable yet

distasteful as well. I still do not know why this conflict of interests has come to this, though I aim to find out. Preferably, before it ends on a note that is too sour for the High Council to swallow."

'Lavuree cast Zimivee a glance, his face clear but his eyes betraying his pensive mood. The gaze made the younger Elite squirm.

"'Lavuree, ideas?"

'Lavuree looked over at them all. "For what, though? So far we have little to go on and less to gain. I realize the Jiralhanae will never let us have that kind of grace period, but I still believe it would be better to stay our weapons until we have more intelligence on this rather strange series of events."

"Well spoken, brother, but it does not help the situation." 'Pohamee said. "As you yourself pointed out- the Brutes would never allow us that kind of time."

"What would you have me do?" Zimivee offered. "I am admittedly not the best of those here this day but I was at the top of my class in stealth and reconâ€¦ I could infiltrate and look around. One Sangheili will be missed easier than half a dozen or more still."

'Lygotee looked at him. "How long do you plan to take at this mission?"

Zimivee shook his head. "I want to give you something reasonable, but I know circumstances aren't always congruent to plans. I would say then that it may take longer than my camouflage battery will last. To that end I doubt I could find a good enough hiding place to wait for it to recharge, either."

"So take two." 'Lygotee prompted. "They are small and can be clipped to the same area on your belt if you can rearrange the rest of your equipment to allow."

'Pohamee nodded his agreement. "I hope you know to be mindful of your scent- the Jiralhanae have noses better than the Unggoy."

"No they don't- they merely listen better." 'Lavuree stated, flatly. "I have seen an Unggoy stagger at an odor he found pungent and distasteful that the Jiralhanae missed entirely. I believe it was the Jiralhanae the grunt was smelling, at that." Turning to Zimivee, he added, "Find the one you feel faint to breathe near, and hold position beside it. The others will not be able to smell you."

"But if I'm feeling faint to breathe near himâ€¦" Zimivee protested.

"No one here has said you may not take a breather with you."

### 3. Dance of Daggers

**\*\*Chapter Three, part one:\*\***

**\*\*1115 hours; Central Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

"Find it!" The Jiralhanae were worked up about something. Zimivee wondered what it could be, since he was still in the process of coming in. They couldn't have noticed him that quickly. A pair of Kig-yar stared through his photoreceptive body, their odd way of seeing the things they looked at making them blind to his presence. He wasn't sure, but he had heard one of his classmates at the Academy call them a nearsighted, facet-visioned creature. The fact that the tone of voice used had not been condescending made him wonder if it wasn't true or just a perception. Facets in their vision or not, he had never seen a Kig-yar yet that had faceted \_eyes\_.

"Find it, you incompetent fools!" A Brute smacked his massive fist into the arm-shield of a nearby Kig-yar, sending the unfortunate creature flying so he actually did hit the wall before slumping onto the floor. Zimivee was grateful he had been born a Sangheili.

He backed into a shaded area between crates of weapons and their accompanying ammunition blocks when the enraged Brute turned to look his direction. When in motion his light-bending cloaking device made the places behind him from any observer look distorted- distorted in the shape of an Elite. But under low-light or no-light environments, the standard cloaking device made the wearer perfectly invisible. Hence Zimivee's choice in locations for retreat. He stared the Jiralhanae down for a good twenty minutes in perfect silence until the creature finally turned away, stomping off in such a fashion that made Zimivee wonder if he was capable of stealth of any type. Even his footfalls were loud, not to mention he seemed to want to buff his toes on the floor's textures while he walked. The Sangheili moved from his corner and across the bay floor, which at the moment was littered so heavily with boxes and crates of things he felt he could have gone without the active camouflage through it and still gone unnoticed.

He had yet to see a single Unggoy or Sangheili anywhere, but he paused to consider when he saw what he at first thought were Kig-yar with their arm-shields deactivated. It seemed odd to him that Kig-yar would do a belly-crawl across the floor without prompting, but on closer inspection he found to his dismay they were not in fact Kig-yar at all. Jackals were not insectoid.

It looked like a hive-squadron's worth of the bug-like Yanime'e, all crowded across the lone empty space on the floor of the bay. If one altered their focus on the sight it would look as if the multitude of up-thrust legs were a fuzzy layer of coarse hair lying on the floor. Zimivee smirked as the next thought crossed his mind, but he moved on to look at more and listen in on more.

Like a rug made from Jiralhanae skin.

He came across another irritated member of the Brute's gathering, though there were many dozens here and this seemed to be an isolated anger incident. This one had a silver dorsal stripe in his coat of fur, making him look rather odd, but everyone who came in contact with him seemed to respect rather than mock him. Zimivee stuck to his side as he traveled to a certain area in the cargo-clogged chamber, but found the trip was not liable to be a short one when that area proved to be the docking seal of the vessel the extra Jiralhanae had arrived on.

Five days ago Zimivee would never have dreamed of doing something like this, but today it didn't seem so unnatural. He was led down several corridors before coming to a room that looked like a sub-operations command chamber for the vessel. In there he saw more personnel, but most of these struck him as background noise. The one standing on the control platform was facing the scrolling holographic display, but he didn't miss when Zimivee's escort walked up the ramp.

Zimivee spared the two a speculative look, and determined they were related somehow. The one they had gone to see turned halfway to greet them. "Report."

Zimivee's escort gave a partial bow. "The Elites remain speculative at best, Father. The despicable creatures have gathered in the Resource Chamber to feed."

"Goodâ€¦ they have not seen their doom coming for them."

"Pity we could not spoil their food." The silver-striped Brute muttered.

His sire turned on him in what Zimivee thought was a rather over-reactive rage. "Do not question me, runt! You will do only as I tell you to! I will not stoop so low as to sicken my prey before I rip them to pieces. This is a moment I want to cherish forever and I will not allow you to ruin it!"

Zimivee's escort growled in protest, but bowed his head anyway. "As you wish, Father."

Turning away to see the display again, the elder Brute snarled over his shoulder, "Go and make sure the Elites have not gathered their weapons, Doaedemet, and ensure the sniveling grunts that follow them are still locked in the Bottom Quarter."

Doaedamet muttered something guttural, but left it at that, leaving the Command Chamber for the decks of the Radiant as bid.

Zimivee frowned, looking past the elder Jiralhanae at the displays. When the hairy beast began to sniff the air curiously, the Sangheili moved away a few paces. The air up on the platform wasn't moving, so any scent would be pooling at their feet. He hoped if this commanding Brute did smell him he would assume it was a drag of scent from his son's being on the Radiant.

Relief swept the young Sangheili when the Brute dismissed the smell and looked down at a fellow Brute beyond the semi-translucent holographic displays. Zimivee peered closer at the information displayed therein, wondering what he was looking at. The ship had been tied into the station's network somehow, he guessed, to be working that way. While this was bad initially, it let Zimivee know at least part of their plans. They weren't going to light up the Radiant and let her remains smolder in space; they wanted to take her in one piece. The Radiant was a rather insignificant outpost, non-tactically positioned and not within decent range of relatively high-demand resources. It had only one redeeming quality, really- since it was built the reason for it's placement had moved elsewhere- a combat front- but the warriors stationed there did tend to come away with a little better understanding of the ways they were meant

to follow.

Reading off the data on the grids, Zimivee decided to take a small risk. He took a data crystal he had been using to keep little notes of things he found either amusing or interesting on, and plugged it into the terminal. Once he had established a connection window, he began downloading data. It wouldn't hold much- he would need to be very picky. He carefully looked over the data he was swiping, edited some of the things he saw were inconsequential, and began seeking more. There had to be records of the plans they had for the Elites of the \_Radiant\_ somewhere, hereâ€¦

A noise turned his head, and he saw too late the elder Brute moving his direction. He had noticed there was unusual activity in the holographic displays there, and would want to stand verily with his nose in them when he came to a stop. Out of options, Zimivee sank to the floor and slipped over the edge of the raised deck to hang rather precariously by his fingers off the edge. There were two lowered slots in the floor opposite one another on the sides of the raised platform where the holographic displays were, and this made dropping from the perch less of an option than he would like.

A more experienced Elite could have done it, but Zimivee wasn't good enough for that- he couldn't figure out how one could drop several meters and not make a sound. That and he always somehow lost his upright position when he let go of any footing or holding he had to make a drop. Usually he landed either badly on a hip or noisily on his knees. Zimivee could only bemoan his predicament. If the Brute found his crystal, he would know something was up. And there really was little to keep that from happening.

Zimivee felt his hoof touch on something that he felt was solid, so to alleviate the pressure on his fingers he rested that hoof on it. Looking down he nearly panicked when he saw there was \_nothing\_ there.

No one had told him he would be accompanied! Praying they wouldn't make things worse by assuming he was on to what \_they\_ were supposed to be doing and assume he would help, Zimivee looked up and pulled mightily to rest an elbow on the deck at the feet of the commanding Brute. Briefly he wondered what would happen if he were to kill this one, right there right now, but dismissed it- his son would only be too happy to take over. Any chaos they might hope to achieve would never happen, and from the way the two had spoken, Zimivee knew letting the son run things would make them worse.

His foothold lifted him slightly, so as soon as the Brute turned away at the beckon of a subordinate, Zimivee was onto the platform and back at the crystal. As soon as he saw it was filled to capacity, he yanked it without regard to the program the action would undoubtedly screw up- there was a certain method by which data-holding devices were meant to be integrated and removed, but only if one deemed the host computer of value.

Taking his prize, Zimivee was content to flee. He had gained enough- not to mention he had just spiked his system so high on adrenalin he just knew he was no longer of use under the circumstances. Stealth could not be easily maintained when one was shaking from a chemical high. He was partway to the exit at the dock when his active camouflage suddenly failed, the battery depleted and spent. He felt

lucky and knew someone was smiling on him when there proved no Brutes or Kig-yar around to spy the event. Quickly he activated the second one he had brought along, and though he knew he would have some left over when he was safely away, he found himself hoping he wouldn't have to do that again.

For most of the way he found himself at a swift jog or an all-out run, but it didn't matter. Panic truly gripped him when he arrived at the doors to see them closing- and already they were too close for him to slip through, even if he had made it to them and they had paused before continuing.

Determined not to fail, Zimivee put on a new burst of speed, crystal in hand. He reached an optimal distance when the hole was no bigger than his fist, and extended his arm in the fashion his father had taught him; if there was nothing else he was good at, Zimivee knew he could always redeem himself with that he had never failed to hit a target he threw something at. The crystal sailed cleanly through the hole, and the doors sealed behind it before it could land. Zimivee dropped his running momentum to a knee, to stop himself before he could slam into the doors, and though he did manage that, he still wound up on his side in a sprawl before he stoppedâ€” just three inches shy.

Zimivee let himself lie where he had fallen, panting hard and fully out of breath. He knew he was still hyper when he realized company was coming before he even saw it. Determination drug his carcass from the floor and moved him to a side passage, despite his burning muscles and weary senses. How he planned to survive the next several hours would be purely up to his luck and ingenuity.

Wary, jumpy and fidgeting, Zimivee watched the Brute walk up to the sealed doors and thump them once with a fist. He sniffed the air and grunted, either disinterested or satisfied. He turned and began to walk away, back the way he had come, but Zimivee couldn't hear a sound past the thunder of his own heart pounding in his ears. It was racing, even after several minutes of holding a stationary position, and he got the feeling it was liable to continue like that for at the very least a couple of hours until he had determined his surroundings were not evidence of certain death; he knew logically there were several methods by which he could outlast each and every Brute on the ship- but his problem remained as he was currently unaware of any of the said methods.

At first it seemed a genuinely hopeless situation. He felt cowardly for hiding from them, but he knew better than to suppose getting himself killed for the sake of honor would please his superiors much. Not to mention he would be deadâ€”

Zimivee's gaze traced the Brute all the length down the corridor until it was out of sight around a corner. When it was gone from view, he thought to move from his place for somewhere better until he realized there was another of the Jiralhanae coming. This one wasn't content to just thump the doors, though, and leave- the Brute took one look at the barrier and turned his hairy back to it, in favor of watching the hallway ahead of him. A moment of speculation later, Zimivee witnessed him touching his communications unit and raising it to his lips.

"No sign of the intruder. But I can smell him. He is

nearby."

Zimivee wanted to panic, unsure what to do about that at first, but the feeling passed quickly enough when he came almost immediately upon an idea. Plucking his plasma rifle from his belt, he took the power node from the underside and restored the gun to its' place. Though rendered useless for now he knew he could always acquire a new battery from the ship's armory.

With the node in hand, Zimivee stepped from his hiding place feeling the burn in his muscles from the adrenalin with every move. He strode quietly right up behind the Brute without even warranting a twitch from the beast, but this was ultimately a slight detriment to progress. Zimivee extended his empty hand and poked the Jiralhanae in the small of his back, unwilling to make himself touch the filthy beast any further than that.

He got the desired reaction; the Brute turned, curious what had just poked him, and right on queue he opened his big toothy mouth to bellow at the sight of the young Sangheili warrior revealed before him. Without pause Zimivee thrust his other hand upward, slamming the node down the Brute's throat and leaving him voiceless and gagging on the foreign object that had been so unceremoniously introduced to his anatomy. Zimivee ducked to the side, more to avoid a weak attempt at grabbing him from the Jiralhanae than to escape the area, rather curious to see what the beast would do to his situation. Even before Zimivee could gain a pace's distance the Brute managed to void the node from his throat, but directly after he clamped his powerful jaws on it and it burst inside his mouth. Pressurized plasma exploded out from the ruptured node, verily vaporizing the Brute's head in a single heartbeat. He never got to yell or even react to the pain to his gums that biting it must have caused, before it was over. Zimivee watched with bemused wonder as the Jiralhanae's headless body tipped over and sank to the floor, the stump on its shoulders sizzling even as much of the loosed plasma began to industriously eat a hole in the floor plating. It wouldn't go that far, but it just might gain the next deck down before it either evaporated or cooled off.

"Sometimes I wonder at the Prophet's wisdom at inducting these creaturesâ€¦" Zimivee muttered, before stepping lightly over the body and making his way down the corridor as he reactivated his cloaking engine. He was still shaking, and still a little nervous about what he could survive and how he would pull it off, but he now knew two things; first he had known already, being that he wasn't the only Sangheili aboard. He just had to find the other and stick to him. But more importantly, secondly, he now knew he at least was capable of maybe pulling this off, and getting out alive.

Perhaps, after all, there was honor, in hiding when one was out numbered.

**\*\*Chapter Three, part two:\*\***

**\*\*2237 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

A glance at the power meter on his cloaking devices told him he couldn't be playing ghost forever. Even as they each in turn overheated and were allowed to cool for the next time around, their power nodes couldn't last much longer. Zimivee heaved a sigh. He had caused as much trouble here as he dared, but he was worn and weary,

and wishing he could step back from it all for a decent piece of rest. Failure or capture was not nor had ever been on the options list, however, although he hadn't seen many of the Jiralhanae too eager to take him alive.

Eleven hours ago he might have been on the Radiant, standing beside his brothers-at-arms, fighting the Brutes the right way, the honorable way—eleven hours had passed since he had seen another Sangheili. It didn't seem quite right that he be stuck on the Brute-infested ship alone when he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he wasn't the only Elite aboard. Despite all his searching and investigating, though, he had thoroughly lost his companion the instant he'd left the fellow on the Command Deck before the ship was disengaged from the Radiant. Still, he wasn't sorry he'd done that—his actions had screwed up the navigations, which meant they were simultaneously not going to leave or aim any weapons at the station. And he knew if he hadn't been as quick as he had been, he might not have gotten his data crystal out that door before it was sealed shut and out of his control. Stolen data trapped within the confines of the place from which it was taken never did anyone any good, ever.

Zimivee strode silently down the corridor, leaving the confines of the engine room behind, and in his wake, another dead Brute. He had always selected his targets by circumstances. Alone was a must—he didn't need more attention than he could handle, although he had been lucky enough to dispatch a pair of the hairy behemoths when the second turned up unexpectedly during the attack on the first. He had no want to try that again, however, being as he had taken a nasty blow that caused his current gait to limp somewhat. With an enormous bruise down one side and three broken ribs, Zimivee needed to be more careful. He had no backup, no retreat, no plan B. If he failed to complete even one of his strikes, there would be nothing to stop the Jiralhanae from taking their frustrations out on his unsuspecting brethren.

For a moment, the Sangheili considered using the ship's systems to track down his only Elite companion, but he dismissed it, as he knew if he did that then the Brutes would not only also know where the fellow was, they would be able to keep track of him for the duration of his stay aboard.

Zimivee didn't want that. At the first corner he turned, a Kig-yar met him at the bend, and his quick side-step to avoid being run into by the smaller creature alerted the avian-like being to his presence—the number one way to defeat one's cloaking was swift movement. His body had been clearly outlined, and now he would need to kill the spooked Jackal before it could call for help. Zimivee reached out and snatched the unfortunate by the back of its skinny head and yanked back and down in a single swift motion. This wouldn't hurt the creature much but it was a surefire way to silence it swiftly. The only sound that escaped the Kig-yar was a muted gurgle as its feet flew out from under it, but Zimivee didn't take his time. He tore the creature's head back the way he'd brought it and jerked it upwards even as it clawed at his arm, but once he closed his other hand around its throat it balled up to use its feet as well. The claws on those toes could lacerate even armored places, and the Kig-yar knew this; it also knew it had less than fifteen seconds to live once its throat was compromised and was taking no chances with such a risk.



Zimivee wrenched his grip in two separate directions, hoping to snap the Jackal's spindly neck, but the bones involved proved harder than he had expected, and all he got for his effort was a slew of torn muscles in the Kig-yar's neck. It was trying to scream, but as long as he kept his hand clamped on its windpipe no such action could take place. Finally, frustrated and tired of having to avoid the claws the creature owned, Zimivee pushed the thing to the floor and placed a knee between its shoulders. As such, he pulled the head back and forced it to fold over so it touched the spine it was attached to and still the Kig-yar continued to fight him. There was no distinctive sound of any bones breaking—how in the world could such a fragile creature be so tough?! They dropped like flies hardly without prompting in battle, their arm-shields the only thing allowing them to last as long as they did, yet here he was trying to kill one deliberately and it was likened to made of rubber! Whatever he threw at it, it just bounced right back.

Zimivee let go of its throat in favor of clamping that hand on its muzzle, using the elongated shape of its own skull as a lever to ease the turning action he implemented. Around the Kig-yar's head came, and it shot him a nasty, withering glare, but then it turned more and he was out of its sight once more. He marveled at the elasticity of the creature when the first bone came out of joint only at the three quarter mark of the second turn. But the twist had completely collapsed every vessel—be it for air or blood or whatnot—in its throat utterly. After the second snap noise, Zimivee left the body where it lay, plucking the arm-shield from its wrist and moving on at a swift trot.

For once, maybe, something might go according to plan, but that would have to wait until he had a plan. Zimivee attached the arm-shield to his belt, and spared his cloaking device a look. Though it was transparent like himself, he could still just make out the meter on the top of the device to tell what it had left. The heat coming off the thing was becoming enough that he could feel it on his skin through his armor, but it would give him a couple more minutes before it auto-shut off. A couple of minutes was enough to clear the site of his last encounter, and he used them well, waiting until the very last minute to activate his other device as the operating one gave out.

Zimivee looked around a corner he came upon, then behind him, before continuing past, wishing he could figure out where his Sangheili companion was hiding. There was a possibility the other fellow thought himself alone, with the notion that Zimivee had made it successfully off the ship, but Zimivee had trod nearly every inch of every deck looking for him—so unless he was somehow avoiding his search by moving through the opposite end of the vessel at all times, there was no way he could have missed Zimivee's presence.

Holding one arm to his side and monitoring all angles he came upon as he came upon them, Zimivee began to look for a place to sit. There would be few of those, if any, but he wasn't immortal and he needed some sort of compensation for all the exertion he'd been through. Looking left down a hall he passed as he passed it, the young Sangheili noted something that gave his journey pause. A door at the other end had guards posted at it, two Brutes at the door itself and a pair of Kig-yar a few paces from it. Whatever was beyond was under no circumstances going to be let out, at least not willingly on the part of the crew. Zimivee wondered what it could be, but he was

disinclined to investigate right away. A guard detail like that would warrant later examination, however.

Marking the place in his mind, Hoku Zimivee resumed his walk. Cautiously he passed a trio of heavily armed Jiralhanae, but ignored them once the risk of physical contact was past; they might smell him they might not, but if he ran from them they would most definitely \_see\_ him. He noted one turning to glance over his massive shoulder at the retreating Elite, but Zimivee didn't react; there was no reason to, and all the reasons in the world not to.

Zimivee wondered if by his failure to vacate the ship in time to avoid being trapped aboard it could be considered a failure of mission and assignment. The Sangheili back at the Resource Chamber had been counting on him for that data, and the best he could do was fling it onto the decks at their feet? He felt pathetic. He held no wish for death, but he felt he would find it if it didn't find him soon enough. There simply was no way he could hold out all alone here trying to hide from a whole ship full of the enemy. Not long enough to get back to the \_Radiant\_, anyway. He knew he didn't have the skills necessary, nor the experience to at least give him an edge to work with.

He'd seen some battle, but strictly speaking, Zimivee was still green. Slowly he made his way farther down the hall, pausing at the gravity lift to check for occupants before stepping in. Thankfully, the device didn't herald each user with a light or noise, though the push of energies contacting a foreign body where it generated the resistance that made the device work did have a muted hum.

So far, the only Brute to be close enough to hear it hadn't noticed, or if it had, the stupid beast had made no reaction to it. This time, the room at the other end of the lift was empty, the ship's crew still believing they were alone and safe aboard their vessel, detached from the \_Radiant\_ as it was. To their current knowledge, there were no Sangheili on board, but they were still puzzled by the recent drop in crew number, as they seemed psychic to the knowledge that the killing had not been a product of infighting. They would find Zimivee eventually, but for the moment he was still free and anonymous. As long as he had a say, he was going to stay that way.

Zimivee walked to the door, but hesitated shy of the sensor range that would automatically open it for him to pass if it wasn't locked. He looked at the frame, then at the door itself, speculatively. The sensors relied on the person or persons seeking passage being hot-blooded or in possession of something that generated heat, as a number of other methods of detection for a door had failed miserably; weight hadn't worked for that the Lekgolo weighed too much and almost always damaged the pressure point in the floor, and the Unggoy just didn't weigh enough. Motion sensors kept the doors opening and closing for every tremble that ran through the ship, as any lesser sensitivity would render the passing crew in ridiculous dancing and waving trying to make the dumb doors open.

It had eventually dawned on the engineers that a heat-sensor would work, as regardless of whether the body was cold or hot blooded, the soldiers of the Covenant used plasma weaponry, and onboard a combat vessel, the odds of a passers by being armed were high. Plasma simply didn't do diddly unless it was roaring hot; and though it was well

contained within the nodes it was kept in when not exploding from a grenade or bolting out from a rifle or pistol, it was still detectible as a hot spot to a well-tuned detector. Zimivee stared hard at the door, struck by a realization.

How hard could it be, to do a heat-sweep of the ship, discover him, maybe his companion too? He wouldn't be able to pass the doors easily without having an unwitting escort, but if he discarded his things, to revert to his cold-blooded nature, Zimivee would be missed.

Another problem presented itself; anywhere he put the stash would be found eventually, by \_someone\_, and at that point the more sophisticated sweep of sensory technology would be performed. And even were he naked he would not be missed by that. Zimivee shook his head. Until things got bad, he would need to persist as is; the fewer clues he left the Jiralhanae, the better. He needed time on his side—the more time he had, the more of them he could safely eliminate, and each kill increased his chances of coming out of this episode alive. Cautiously, he stepped close to the door. It gave a faint hiss, and slid open. Zimivee put one hoof forward, and stopped. Four Brutes all stood assembled in the hall, too far to be detected by the door, each and all staring either at or through him.

Hoping and praying it was the latter, Zimivee slowly shifted his weight to that hoof and prepared to move through. With four of them all watching him directly, the odds of his camouflage working to effect were slim indeed unless they all had cataracts. Adrenalin dumped into his system as panic set in in the split second the lead Brute opened his big mouth and bellowed. He'd seen the Sangheili, or his outline at least, and yanked his weapon from his bandolier. Zimivee disregarded his camouflage's effective parameters and darted to the side to avoid a volley of plasma fire from the rifle in the brute's hand. Aware he didn't have near the munitions necessary to take them all down, and knowing he would need to, Zimivee moved the other direction, back past the Brute in the front while simultaneously coming out into the hall.

Evidently possessed of either poor sight or confused by his action, the lead Jiralhanae fired the next few shots after Zimivee's trail, and not directly at Zimivee. The Elite switched back upon the Brute, and slammed a balled fist into the wrist of the hand holding the plasma rifle. The weapon shot out of the Brute's grasp, smacked into the wall, and clattered to the floor. Zimivee turned his upper body and slammed the next hit into the end of the Brute's muzzle, where it was soft cartilage and the impact was liable to hurt more. It worked—Zimivee felt and heard the nose bones crack under his knuckles, and blood spurted from a nostril before the Brute recoiled, howling, both hands on the injury. With that one preoccupied, Zimivee could then take on his brethren without needing to worry about him for a good minute, maybe more.

When the second Brute bolted forward, seeking an enemy, Zimivee pivoted on a hip and slammed a hoof into his belly, staggering him back and causing him to rethink that idea. Zimivee wondered briefly what he was doing; there was no Sangheili alive that could take on a Jiralhanae and win in hand-to-hand combat, let alone more than one. Yet here he was, hitting them with his fists and hooves, maybe an elbow here or a knee there, and all for the sake of his current loadout of weaponry being ill-suited to the task of neutralizing

them; a grenade or two would hurt them, but it would also likely kill Zimivee. And shooting them at close range with a plasma rifle was ridiculous- it would just tell them right where he was so they could wring his little neck. Plasma fire took nearly two minutes to burn through Brute hair, mostly because it was matted so thick and pasted down with so heavily with skin oil and whatever they had gotten near enough to collect in their hair- such as dirt and other detritus. Their own lack of hygiene was enough armor to render everything Zimivee had on hand moot. He i \_had\_ /i to hit them, else he was as liable to do detrimental damage to his own person while he was at it. He had to try- letting them go and tell the others was even more out of the question.

Zimivee would need to kill them all with his bare hands- and by the Rings but the Gods only knew how he was going to pull \_that\_ offâ€|

**\*\*Chapter Three, part three:\*\***

**\*\*2237 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Thin 'Pohamee walked back the way he'd come. Fifteen, sixteen, counting. He'd been pacing the length for twenty minutes, but he wasn't counting the time. The stretch was forty-one paces long, but he seemed to cover it within seconds- and he was just walking. There was no such thing as time for 'Pohamee, lost more or less in his own thoughts. He knew if anything happened that would require his attention, someone would alert him, and it would be taken care of in due time.

"Don't wear a hole in the floor, 'Pohamee."

'Pohamee looked up, pausing. "It helps me think."

"Muscle memory would take care of that walk." 'Lavuree scoffed. "You aren't paying any attention to the objects in passing, and you aren't listening to the sound of your hooves on the floor, so I say again. Don't wear a hole."

'Pohamee frowned, but he knew 'Lavuree was right. The two Elites had been waiting for the second dispatch of cloaked warriors to return for an hour. 'Lygotee had departed with a number of other high-ranking individuals to speak with the Supreme Commander. These were not back yet either, and while 'Lavuree was content to rest his legs in a reclined position seated at a table, 'Pohamee had been trying to wear his off.

"Why don't you just sit down and be patient?"

"Patience has never been an asset to me, 'Lavuree. You above all should understand that. I am quick or I am dead."

"But your incessant pacing will not save any lives, 'Pohamee." 'Lavuree mentioned. "You might do well to conserve what energy you own for lasting against whatever siege the Jiralhanae plan to enact against us."

'Pohamee turned to see his teammate, facing him fully. "Siege, 'Lavuree? What do you know that we do not? We have sent numerous spies into that fold and gotten nothing out of it- not even the spies

come back!"

'Lavuree gave him a languid smile. "That is something, at least- we know not to use the tactic anymore."

'Pohamee growled with frustration, and turned away. "You cannot possibly be this calm under these circumstances." Looking past his shoulder at the other Elite, 'Pohamee asked, "What are you hiding? What do you know that we do not? You have done this to us before- by some method, I know not what, you find out what we need to know and never spare a moment of mystery to it's pursuit. Do not leave us guessing, brother, this is not the time for games."

'Lavuree pulled his legs up and sat forward. "You think I'm hiding something, do you? I have exactly two ideas what you might be thinking- which is it?"

'Pohamee studied his teammate for a moment. "I must know the choices before I can choose, 'Lavuree."

"One, that I have a network, some secret contacts somewhere, and they feed me information, and two, that I have contacts within the Jiralhanae ranks and either they are or I am a traitor to our respective races."

'Pohamee threw back his head and laughed. "Ludicrous! You don't even have friends in the non-secret sector of this Covenant. You always hide behind myself and our Leader for companionship. And as for any treason that might surround youâ€¦ I cannot say for certain, you might surprise me, but I am apt to deny such an accusation of you."

'Lavuree smiled mildly. "How comforting, to know you trust me so well."

'Pohamee issued a devious grin. "I trust whom I choose to when I choose to."

"It has ever been a most annoying quality, 'Pohamee, but it suits you." 'Lavuree stated, resting an elbow on the tabletop and his head on that fist.

'Pohamee merely responded with a slight inclination of his head, before resuming his pacing. 'Lavuree frowned, but didn't say anything, as his first complaint had gotten no result and a second wasn't liable to, either. He watched as 'Pohamee paced away, then turned and came back, but instead of turning and going again, the Elite stopped, and faced 'Lavuree a second time.

"\_Do\_ you have contacts?"

'Lavuree raised his head. "Why?"

'Pohamee shrugged. "I wondered."

"Not especiallyâ€¦" 'Lavuree replied. "But I do have a knack for discovery of the concealed." He tilted his head. "They're back."

'Pohamee was about to ask who was back when the door to the Resource

Chamber opened and three Elites came through, loosening and discarding equipment onto the first set of tables they came to. Seeing none of the usual brass were available, they began to search out the next set down for report. Spotting 'Lygotee's team set apart from the rest of the mass of Sangheili, the Elite in charge of the reconnaissance mission moved in their direction.

'Pohamee turned to see them, as 'Lavuree rose from his seat to stand beside him. Once the gap was closed, the newly returned Elite, a specialist named Avin Sză™năqee, drew up and held out a hand. In it was held a data crystal that looked like it had been chewed. "We discovered this on the deck by the dock doors where the Jiralhanae vessel had been docked." He said. "It belonged to Zimivee."

'Pohamee and 'Lavuree exchanged glances. The game was up- if not completely, then mostly. The young Elite was very likely dead, found and killed by the very creatures he had been spying upon. And though he had volunteered, it still weighed heavily on them as it had been they who gave the go-ahead. Taking the crystal, 'Pohamee plugged it into a terminal, and began to review the data stored therein. His mandibles opened in surprise. "That's not possible!" He exclaimed.

"What is it, 'Pohamee?" 'Lavuree asked, stepping up beside him to see.

"Zimivee must have downloaded this from the main computer on the Brute's vessel. But according to this, there is no High Council! The entire compliment was destroyed by the Brutes."

"What?" 'Lavuree pressed to see for himself. "How can that be possible? What else does it say?"

"Nothingâ€¦ it looks like it was edited to be a smaller file. This crystal is filled to maximum capacity." 'Pohamee sighed. "By the looks of these other files, whomever did the download had a very picky attitude of which bits were important and what could be left out."

"The Commanders will need to know." 'Lavuree said.

"We will tell them when they deem it proper to show themselves again, brother- do not rush yourself." 'Pohamee replied, tartly. "I am more interested actually in the last hour of the youth who got this for us."

"We know nothing. The dock was sealed when we arrived, the crystal lying motionless where we found it." Sză™năqee put in. "We think it was likely lying there awhile before our arrival, due to that it had been run over once already."

'Pohamee shook his head, and looked at 'Lavuree. "We will need to spare time to find what remains of him later- for now there are too many Brutes about."

Sză™năqee nodded his agreement. "What else does it contain?"

"Information, little bits, about movements of the Covenant, the reports of the current circumstances surrounding the Human war, and

the state of progress on the Great Journey." 'Pohamee said, reading off each as he came to them. "Plans for Brute movements, troop deployment and positionsâ€¦ it says the Arbiter was supposedly dead at one date and then he turned up alive again nearly a day and a half later."

"Interesting." 'Lavuree muttered. "It would seem the Covenant has left us behind."

"Behind indeed. This station is to become a staging area for Jiralhanae troops and ships, and we are in the way. They have full authorization to kill us all."

SzÄ™nagœe snarled something neither 'Lavuree nor 'Pohamee understood, but he gained both of their attentions for it. "They have invited disaster, and disaster was never one to refuse an invitation." He told them. "They murdered our Leadersâ€¦ and then they came here and murdered some of our very own. Shall they not pay for the blood they have spilled?"

"Would you give more of it to them in a blind frenzy of rage and pain? We mustn't grant them such a circumstance; we will show them we cannot be goaded and obliterated with such ease." 'Pohamee replied. "They shall pay, each and every one of them, for this aberration they have committed. Gather the others, and waken the Unggoy. They will prove useful."

SzÄ™nagœe regarded the Elite for a moment, deciding whether to obey the command or not, as the between the two of them, neither held more rank than the other. He finally decided it was a fair enough course of action, and departed to perform as requested despite the chain of command being somewhat rather out of order at current. There was nary a one that felt charging blindly at the Brutes- like a Brute would- was a good idea. After he was gone, 'Lavuree turned to 'Pohamee.

"It has started, brother." He said, quietly. "It has started without us."

'Pohamee gave his teammate a curious look. "What has started, 'Lavuree?"

He shook his head. "Go and rouse the Leaders from their meetings. If we are not moving within the next hour we should lose much ground that we will need in order to hold the Jiralhanae back."

'Pohamee sighed. "There you go again, and you haven't said why this is so and how you know."

'Lavuree tipped his head. "Are you willing to gamble that I am wrong?"

"No, not this hour. Our brothers are eager for Jiralhanae blood- let them have it at last. Let them deliver these foul beasts to the Gods where they shall know justice." He turned from the terminal and made his way to the chamber the officers were using for discussion. 'Lavuree was not far behind, pausing only to extract the data crystal before following with it in hand.

**\*\*Chapter Four, part one:\*\***

**\*\*2405 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Everything drew to a halt, like a vid slowly freezing due to program error. 'Lygotee's breath caught in his throat, and held there for several heartbeats until the moment was passed, and he allowed himself to exhale quietly. Seven Brutes paced away down the hall, sometimes grouching about the thick scent of Sangheili in the corridor; not one had noticed it was full of them. When at last the last one was around the corner and through the last door in sight of the entrance to the docking bay, the Elites sealed the door behind them. 'Lygotee listened to the melody of Jiralhanae cries of alarm, surprise and pain combined with the stinging metallic notes the energy swords made when sent through flesh. Presently the smell of cooked hair wafted down the hall to his position.

A great number of them had gathered in the corridors outside the bay, and for every batch of patrols sent out a group of Sangheili would slip in- 'Lygotee was next. He and nine others making a total of ten Elites all passed the door into the cavernous bay past the elbows of the next batch of Brutes, all of fifteen minutes later.

Rendered transparent by the technology on his belt, it was difficult to focus, but he had had enough experience with it to understand what each blur represented; and though all those he dared linger near to were in the same state, he found them easy enough to spot with his experienced eye. A typical Jiralhanae was not apt to look for the distortions unless tipped off there was an Elite somewhere in his proximity that he knew was cloaked. Until the actual combat began, the dumb beats would stay more or less clueless, or at least until some unfortunate was either sniffed out or stepped on by accident.

So far, in the past hour, nothing had gone amiss. 'Lygotee moved to a good position where he knew he could linger for a good amount of time uncloaked, and deactivated his device so it could get a head start on cooling off. After blinking the fuzz out of his vision, the Commander proceeded to begin the noting and categorization of all the details of the room he was in. He couldn't see all the places, but he had a good estimation of where a lot of the crates were. There were sentries placed at the entrances and exits of both the detached docks and the corridors, and lookouts on each consecutive level of decking open to the bay. Stars could be seen through the force-shield sealed entrance for maintenance bots and small vessels, and the light by the door to the interstellar ship docking ring glowed prominently red.

'Lygotee toggled his comm unit, once, three times and once again, and as he gained each acknowledging reply in like kind, he was privy to the amusing spectacle of a nearby Brute granting his comm unit a series of looks while trying to determine why it was clicking- the method of communications between the Elites was for just that reason- any Jiralhanae would be smart enough to recognize voiced commands and replies, and seek ruin upon the plans come to by the Sangheili. But 'Lygotee had not known what idiocy would yield such comical reactions to a simple sequenced series of clicks brought on by opening and closing the communications channel in use.



After it was quiet again, the Brute growled at the device, and flung it onto the top of a nearby crate as an act of dismissal and mild frustration. Evidently it had tired of malfunctioning equipment a while ago. 'Lygotee began to wonder what had brought that on, though, as he had no knowledge of anything inside the Jiralhanae fort going wrong.

Concerned something might be very wrong, he toggled his comn again, earning a warning growl from the Brute. A moment later, 'Lavuree's response came through, and the agitated Brute reached up and smashed the unit it had just discarded to ease its irritation. 'Lygotee was not amused. Jiralhanae weren't usually that easily angered to the point of destructiveness against their own equipment- other members of the Covenant, sometimes their own clan members, but not inanimate objects.

A form slipped between crates and stilled behind the Brute in question, settling there and losing the visibility generated by motions. 'Lygotee watched in wide wonder as the beast seemed to calm, and breathe a tired sigh as it gave its surroundings another survey with a disinterested gaze. An eternity slipped by, but the Brute never did regain his previous composure, even after the vague shape left its presence in favor of somewhere less occupied. 'Lygotee waited for his teammate to come about, but a full half minute elapsed and nothing happened- he nearly freaked when something applied pressure to his side, however, until he realized it was just 'Lavuree, glaring at him past his cloaking engine.

Relaxing, 'Lygotee let go of the Elite's throat and put his hand down. "You should know better than to spook me." He whispered, annoyed.

"Spook you, Leader?" 'Lavuree scoffed, rubbing his throat. "You called me!" He hissed. "Next time I shall not be so forthcoming when you summon me."

'Lygotee snapped his mandibles at his teammate. "We have been over this! What happened in here to make the Brutes so agitated?"

'Lavuree flexed his, obviously contemplating returning the expression, but in the end let it drop in favor of returning to the topic at hand; "They believe a number of us have infiltrated their command vessel and are responsible for the disruption and loss of life there. The killings happened directly after the ship left the docking ring to prevent just such an occurrence."

'Lygotee nodded, thinking. Finally, all he could come up with at the time came out. "Why did you touch me when you arrivedâ€|?"

'Lavuree seemed to smile a wicked smile, but being transparent made the expression hard to discern from the pattern on the floor behind his head. "I turned your comn unit off, Leader, because you left it on after calling for this discussion."

'Lygotee wanted nothing more right then than to kick himself hard enough to leave a bruise worth limping for. Where was his mind? This was the last thing he needed right now. He sighed. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, Leader. Thank the Gods that I was observant enough to notice."

'Lygotee waved it off in favor of another change in topic. "What is the plan for the watch above us when we strike?"

"There have already been several dispatches to the upper decks to ensure they are not a problem, Leader. They are taken care of."

"How much longer until we are all inside and in position?"

'Lavuree turned in an odd direction, making his transparent form seem to bend in an unnatural fashion. When he turned back again, he said, "Maybe another minute, Commander. Then you might expect the go ahead signal without waiting long."

'Lygotee studied the way the floor looked through his comrade, and wondered if he looked like that when he too was invisible. A thought later, he asked, "And those already inside? Are they in position?"

"As best they were able, I presume," 'Lavuree stated, contemplatively, picking at a plate of armor over a lower mandible as he did so. "This incredible mess the Jiralhanae have made unloading crates of supplies has made the execution somewhat difficult to accomplish."

'Lygotee nodded, satisfied. "Good— return to your place."

"Yes, Leader." 'Lavuree stepped out of his Commander's hiding place and slipped away, between boxes. 'Lygotee's gaze turned to follow a Brute as it paced past, and noted with disdain that the plasma rifle it was carrying was in its hand. Another with a grenade launcher/bladed cudgel followed the first shortly. Brilliant! They had heavy weapons, here— things could very easily get out of hand if anything happened to their re-supply of troops.

With a long sigh the Sangheili shook his head; there was never a war fought nor battle won that did not see the victor as badly or worse wounded than the defeated. Many a fine warrior would die this day, and maybe perhaps himself, as well. Through a narrow slit between the boxes several boxes away he saw a familiar glint, and a moment later the predetermined sequence of clicks piped through his comm.

Now!

'Lygotee exploded out of his hiding place in an almost perfect synchrony with nearly all of his kind, pulling free and activating his energy sword as he drew it across his first victim. The Brute didn't even get to howl, but enough was said by all those surviving him to make up for the lack. 'Lygotee didn't let him hit the floor before he was joined by one of his brethren, but then the power node in his sword was low and unlike the newer ones issued to those who earned them, the node in his was harder to replace and held less energy. Replacing it back on his belt, 'Lygotee pulled his carbine from his shoulder and sent the first round through the back of the next Brute's mouth, the bolt slamming its head back and dropping it in its tracks even if the blow didn't kill it immediately.

'Lygotee hoped that it had, as he fired into the fray that he was suddenly a part of. His blood curdled at the first sound of a Sangheili scream, the first among many that was the direct result of the Jiralhanae recovering from the surprise and shock of the first few minutes of the attack. The doors to the corridors opened, and a few hundred more flowed in, Elites herding Unggoy like little goats.

The wild-eyed grunts quickly mowed down the first row of Brutes with their combined plasma fire, but the Brutes were having nothing if not a field day with those they managed to get close to. A pair of them plowed right through the littler creatures, smashing them flat and running them under, killing several and incapacitating more than a few just with the one move. 'Lygotee spotted 'Pohamee and SzÄ™naqee out of the corner of his eye, and it occurred to him to wonder where 'Lavuree had gotten off to and if he were holding his own or needed any assistance.

There was too much happening directly around him, though, for him to simply break away and search for his teammate, so all he could do was wonder. A heartbeat later he saw a Brute sailing through the air in a ballistic arc, to slam and sprawl against the force field barrier of the bay door before dropping to the floor and back out of sight behind innumerable boxes. 'Lygotee was awed, but he couldn't let it stop his own movements or allow himself to want to investigate. Everyone was doing as they deemed necessary, and if it meant tossing Jiralhanae like little Unggoy then that was what it meant. 'Lygotee raised his carbine to shoot another Brute in the head, and was swatted to the side by one that had suddenly appeared beside him. He rolled with the momentum the blow had afforded him, coming up onto his hooves again before the beast could reach over and stomp him while he was down.

The Brute snarled at him, and lathered his shields with rounds from his plasma rifle, a scuffed and beaten looking red weapon that made 'Lygotee wonder at how it still worked. He quickly found out why it looked that way, though, when stars exploded behind his eyes after the impact the thing made into the side of his head. Staggered by the blow, and with his shields at less than half power, 'Lygotee had to fight like he had never before in order to keep from being owned by the beast. He was not about to let them have him- if they wanted his blood, they would need to bleed for it.

He aimed for the Brute, and surged upwards, coming off his balance for the move and hoping he didn't miss because of it. He hit the Brute and rebounded, the battery in his sword depleted. The Jiralhanae moaned weirdly, and toppled, but the fight wasn't over yet and he couldn't use that trick again. Stashing his sword with the switch still in the active position due to no real need to flip it over just yet, 'Lygotee had to dive for cover when rounds from a grenade launcher flew through the air at him following a brightly glowing plasma grenade from somewhere else.

Explosions followed him for several paces, but he managed successfully to get clear of the blast radius of each. Slipping between boxes, the Elite held there for long enough so his shields began to recharge, but before it was finished he reactivated his cloaking engine and darted for a new place. His old one erupted hard enough so the boxes there were peeled open and weapons and ammo sprayed out across the floor.

Needles sailed over his head as he raced along, slipping between and around combatants and giving quick aid to whomever needed it. He paused to issue a kick to the gut of a particularly difficult Brute, doubling the beast over and allowing the Elite he had been harrowing to slam the back of its head with his rifles. The Brute recovered from both assaults quickly, though, and snatched a wrist to hold it out to the side as it opened its mouth in the Elite's face. The other rifle came up and the hot end was crammed into the maw of mention, before filling the brute's mouth with enough plasma to burn out the back of its head.

'Lygotee jumped a fallen Brute and stopped at the other side, facing a peculiar member with a silver dorsal stripe. This one was wearing armor, not just the bandolier and belt set the rest had on, and the weapon in its hands was something of a modified grenade launcher. There were also two spike rifles on its hips. 'Lygotee looked him up and down, but he was still invisible and the fellow didn't notice him until the device auto shut off. Startled out of his reverie, and with the intense noise of the combat happening in the room rushing back to him, 'Lygotee had to dodge to the sides in both directions at once to avoid being slammed in the chest by a souped-up grenade. The explosions generated by them seemed to be worse than a typical explosive by four times, and the shrapnel they each flung was impeded not by loss of power but lack of fly space due to all the boxes-wonderful cover, he thought, given to them by the Brutes themselves.

Still, even a cargo crate couldn't hold up to that kind of abuse, and he was chewing away at them following 'Lygotee with those grenades. He toggled the switch on his invisibility device, but it was still too hot and refused to activate. Irritated and tired of being shot at already, 'Lygotee came around the beast and mounted the top of a crate to jump onto him from above. The Brute spun about, but the grenade flew past the target and then the Elite was upon him, wrestling for the weapon.

The struggle lasted until 'Lygotee pulled up a leg and slammed his knee into the Brute's jaw, causing him to involuntarily arch back and release the launcher. He came back pissed off, though, and 'Lygotee had no time to compensate when he was seized, picked up off the floor and thrown into the tangled mess he had made of the crates.

Slices and shards of metal crate stabbed at his armor and depleted his shields again. He rolled free of the mess only to be grabbed again and taken by an elbow to be swung about and slammed into another set of crates, these so far undamaged by the fighting. Pain shot through 'Lygotee's midsection, and he balled up where he landed when he was released, fighting down the spasm his nerves had enacted in response to the intense impact. After what felt an eternity, and with his heart pounding in his ears, 'Lygotee spread a hand on the floor and tried to rise from it.

The Brute stepped close and kicked him, turning him over against the crates he had just been hit with. Winded and too disoriented to react, 'Lygotee just lay there, unable to do much more than await his fate, whatever it might be.

As the Jiralhanae came into focus, though, he realized it had turned from him and engaged another. Thunderous explosions and bright fiery

plasma bursts decorated the fight, which he discovered a moment later was hand to hand- a bad equation where Brutes were concerned. The familiar flavor of his own blood became evident in his mouth when he tried to inhale, black spots in his vision telling him he was about to pass out from air loss due to having both lungs collapsed after the impact to the crates.

This was not the best place to be unconscious, though, and he knew it. If he was found by the wrong party, there would be nothing he could do about it. Color and motion blurred together as one, and sound distorted enough to become unrecognizable. Before long, the whole room darkened, leaving nothing spare the deep empty abyss where no one could see their own hands.

'Lavuree didn't need to look to know his Commander wasn't dead; his enemy was irritated because he hadn't gotten to finish him. 'Lavuree didn't need to harass or goad his enemy, either- he was already mindless from rage and all the Elite needed was to work that to his advantage. Slowly he was pushing the Brute to the edge, and when he went wild and berserk with that rage, he could kill him without needing to watch each action to make sure it wasn't overshot or worse.

The Brute hammered at what he thought was his antagonist, aware now that not all Elites were equal. His last kill hadn't actually died, but it wasn't much of a problem when he could kill him later- but this one refused to even so much as take a blow. He was quick and slippery and he knew where to hit the Brute where it would hurt. When he thought he might have him, he would slip away as if he had been greased.

'Lavuree swatted aside the grabbing hand and punched the beast in the nose, but he found he had wasted time in doing so and now he was out. A grip too strong to break clamped around his waist, and he was in the process of coming away from the floor when he lifted his legs and planted his hooves opposite the Brute's head. Sinking his fingers into the grip on his midsection, 'Lavuree coiled and tore it away, to leap from the impromptu perch into a back flip that landed him on his hooves several paces away, so he had plenty of time to jump up and run along the Brute's back onto the floor behind him as he charged more or less on all four limbs. Seeing he had missed, the Brute spun about, his eyes burning with hatred and his muscles quivering with energy. He needed to snap this one in half or he would never be sated. 'Lavuree was waiting for him when he got there, ready and able to meet him. This time he allowed the Brute to slam into him, but only because he felt he could take it.

Feeling his victory at last, the Jiralhanae rose back to his feet and rose up for a double fisted punch. 'Lavuree reached up and seized his jaw, bringing his arms down prematurely and with less power for hitting with, to loosen the grasp on his mouth.

'Lavuree let his hands hover at his mouth, using the well-timed distraction to pull free two plasma grenades and prime them. He held them up for the Brute to see, so the panic would register in his brain. The Elite let him get several paces away before throwing them at him, effectively trading places with the Brute and keeping from the suicide the Brute had thought he meant to perform.

Doaedemet saw the bright balls of plasma explosive sailing at him,

saw them adhere to his armor. He had no time left for any sort of cry or retaliation, no time to re-close the gap he had put between himself and the Elite, as the crafty warrior had let all the fuse burn alreadyâ€¦ it was a fool thing to do, but this time it had worked, and now there was nothing to save him from his end.

Who was the fool, he wondered, the Elite, or Doaedemet?

**\*\*Chapter Four, part two:\*\***

**\*\*0200 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

A swift kick and a sideways impact to the head sent the Brute topsy-turvy, stunned and down but not yet dead. He left it for the Elites at his flanks, moving deeper into the room that was the docking bay on the ninth quarter of the industrial side of the station. If there came any more, the sheer numbers of the Unggoy would drown them, as the waves of the little creatures swam past his feet. Somewhere in the masses were several medically capable and equipped grunts, so anyone who fell and was left behind the lines of actual conflict could be seen to immediately. Down on the bottom floor, where much of the fighting was happening, the third team of Sangheili burst in, shredding the Brutes that had been weakened by the first and second. Dial M'akamee was on the second floor, carving his way across the deck to clear the air above his Elites of enemy fire. So far he had lost enough warriors and killed enough of the enemy to bathe a star-class vessel in blood. Somewhere there ought to have been a few pairs of Lekgolo, somewhere in the bowels of the \_Radiant,\_ but he had yet to so much as hear of them in a week and had assumed the Prophet had taken them with him when he left. It was becoming evident that that was just what had happened. The massive and effective Hunters were nowhere to be found, and there was also no sign of their remains.

If the Brutes had killed them, too, they hadn't done it where the Lekgolo were supposed to have been posted. Dial paused to survey the battle below him, trying to count heads in the writhing mess of often tossing bodies. A Brute that had been alive suddenly was dead, an Elite that had seemed fallen got back on his feet. Deeper into the chamber the opposite was true; the Sangheili were having trouble claiming the room, but just when Dial supposed it was a possible outcome, the air filled with buzzing insectoids.

"Curses! They have brought the Yanime'e with them! Warriors! Take them down! Concentrate your fire on them until there are no more." Dial commanded, realizing instantly that the combined fire from those bugs would do just the same as what the combined fire of his Unggoy had done.

He watched with satisfaction as all the bolts needles and rounds from his compliment flew at the bugs, leaving little to no flight room amid the fray. Yanime'e dropped onto their targets and intended victims in droves, unable to withstand or escape the sheer amounts of fire sent at them from the side. Dial hated to waste such good troops, but the bugs were something very short of hard wired and it was difficult at best to give them new orders if they conflicted with the old. The Supreme Commander had seen this sort of problem before, and adapting to a situation was better left to the other varied members of the Covenant.

"Commander- more Brutes!" The Elite to his left called, redirecting his aim even as he spoke. Dial had enough time to look, the motion accompanied by the same of four others, before the Brutes of mention charged in and tore the speaking Elite open where he stood. Dial flew over the Unggoy's heads and slammed his hooves into the offending Brute, knocking him to the floor. Before he could rise, he stabbed the arrogant creature in the throat with the tip of his energy sword. Blood bubbled out of the wound, but the Brute's spinal cord had been severed, and the blood loss was rendered irrelevant; the Brute was already dead.

The charger's accompanying troop mates barreled in, then, exchanging heavy fire with the Elites Dial had brought with him. The shorter Unggoy bent so they were even shorter, standing beneath the roof of free-flying plasma, and sent up their own volley at the Brute's legs. Dial watched as a dozen Jiralhanae dropped not from loss of life but from loss of limb when the needles and plasma showering on their legs became enough to sever them. The floor was slick with the blood of both sides, but neither would stop until one or the other were all completely destroyed.

Dial had not come upon his high rank by accident, nor had he stumbled his way there; he knew things others did not, could spot things others would never see. He also was prone to recognizing when something benign was not as peaceable as it seemed, and though nothing about the current situation was peaceful, Dial began to recognize the signs of something worse coming up. What could be worse than a troop of Brutes, though, that the Brutes had in supply? The question burned at him as he sliced and hacked at the enemy he presently faced. A small number of the Elites with him began to withdraw from the front of the line, but it only occurred to Dial to follow their action when he saw why they were doing it; by threes the Unggoy sought the front, each carrying a fuel rod cannon, the giant weapons dwarfing their carriers.

Yet nothing was more effective than just that, and even as one was cut down before firing the first shot, the rest buried the Brutes in huge bombs of superheated plasma. Dial could only look on as the floor and parts of both walls to the right and behind the Brutes began to sear and vaporize under the intensity of the barrage.

Letting the Unggoy carry the weapons onboard a space-borne craft, no matter how big, was a disaster waiting to happen, but at times one had to cut one's losses- whoever gave the order to send them forward had been the one that got tired of watching his brothers be killed around him first- eventually Dial would have gotten to the same point, he knew, which was why they were given the guns to begin with and brought along. Dial stepped forward to survey the damage done to the floor when it was overwith and the Brutes were all dead- most of them dissolved-and defeated, but aside from it being hot enough to melt his hooves right off his legs at the moment, it seemed to have retained enough to traverse over without falling through.

This was good- they would need to. But until it cooled enough for them to pass, they were trapped where they were unless they chose to drop into the action below them or go back the way they had come. Dial looked over the conflict below them, half his remaining troop following his gaze.

From somewhere near their entrance point, he could hear a grunt fussing at an Elite, scolding him for something in his native tongue. Some of the fallen hadn't died, and were drug to the back of any perceived possible combat zones for treatment. Evidently, one of them had taken an injury either in or close to a nerve cluster, and it hurt too much for the warrior to want anyone to touch it.

Dial breathed a weary sigh. He raised his sword, and looked at it. He had more than half the battery left, and he had more than half the Jiralhanae population to go. He cast a look at the warriors assembled beside him. "Half of you stay where you are. Maintain the clarity of this deck- allow no Brute access but die only if you must to ensure that. The rest of you, follow me. We are going to give our brothers on the bottom floor a hand."

He received a chorus of eager growls and worts, the Unggoy emanating their own slightly more high-pitched hoots and cries. The Sangheili wanted nothing more than to spend some time killing the Jiralhanae, and the grunts with them were willing enough to follow them that they too seemed to have adopted the angered stance of their leaders. The Sangheili had not been generous to the little aliens, but they were far kinder than any Jiralhanae had ever been.

With this, Dial M'akamee and forty Elites piled onto the bottom floor of the docking bay, only a dozen or so of these turning from the fight to catch the following Unggoy, who were eager to jump but unable to handle the stress the impact would grant them- if the Sangheili didn't catch them, they would be as good as dead when they hit bottom. The rest immediately engaged the Brutes they could see, effectively clearing a swath and generating a brief lull in part of the bay. Once the Unggoy were down, the rest of the Elites raced after the retreating Brutes, showering the hairy behemoths with as many rounds from all their guns as they could.

Needles and hyper sonic rounds hammered between bolts of plasma, some of the encroaching Sangheili warriors scooping up fallen or scattered weaponry and dual-wielding them against the enemy. Dial pushed through to the bridge and around to where the docking-ring doors were, knowing there was one advantage he owned that the Brutes could never counter.

He was captain of this ship, and no one knew his ship better than he did.

Dial M'akamee sliced out at a Brute, but the beast dodged, causing him to miss. The quick Jiralhanae then promptly defeated his own luck by returning head-on, whereupon Dial ran him through and left him curled on the floor to die of one of two means- execution by the Elites behind him, or blood poisoning from having his feces mix with his blood inside the wound. Another came forward, firing his plasma rifle, but he only had one and he barely buzzed Dial's shielding before six dual-wielding Elites brought him down. Dial smiled grimly as he passed the heaps of bodies the fighting had left, passing more than a few cold and stiff faces he knew. Blast scoring was everywhere, broken crates and busted weaponry scattered throughout the mess, cracked plasma nodes leaking onto the floor, big pools of sticky, half-coagulated blood, bits and pieces of both Sangheili and Jiralhanae bodies all over the place.

"This one's alive, Leader." One of the Unggoy said, hopping more than



walking to the indicated Elite. Dial watched as the last of the Brutes backed through the door that had been locked, and let it close before locking it again. There couldn't be more than two or three dozen of them in there, if the number on the floor in here was anything to gauge by.

"Is there another way in there, Commander?" The Elite to his left asked.

"No." He answered. "That area was built to withstand explosive decompression. When the door locks, four auto sealers come online- anything offensive against the door causes them to weld it shut, and only a complete replacement of the entire door would open it again."

"What is back there?"

"The docking ring- and the ship they took to get here. We cannot even hope to starve them out." Dial snorted. "We will need to circumnavigate the whole of the \_Radiant\_ to get into there. There is only one other entrance and I doubt if it hasn't been sealed like those leading to the Resource Chamber. Stillâ€¦" He turned from it to see the bodies strewn about at his feet. "Their retreat will give us time to pick up this mess, and rearrange things to suit our needs." He looked at each of the faces looking back at him in turn. "Survey for survivors- have the Unggoy carry the rest to the freezer chamber for later identification and processing when we have time."

"Yes, Leader." One by one they slowly dispersed, doing as he commanded. Unggoy were everywhere, bouncing between corpses looking for life or goodies. Brutes didn't typically have anything worth much on them, unless one was in the business of making hand cream out of refined and filtered Brute skin oil. The creatures certainly produced enough of the substance to be a marketable product- even if nobody wanted to buy such a thing. Dial scanned the room briefly from where he stood, looking in general at the whole thing. He saw nothing he liked.

In the end he deactivated his sword and hung it on his belt again, to assist for lack of anything better to do while he thought with the cleaning and sorting out of the bay he was in. Already several of the bodies had been taken away, dead ones being carted off to the freezer chamber to be preserved until something else could happen to them.

They were all heroes, Dial mused, driving back the Brutes who sought their utter destruction. He dared not count the numbers, knowing to do so would increase the weight he would then carry back into battle. Just looking told the logical side of his brain that it was easily over a hundred. The actual statistic would need to wait anyway- the numbers of boxes impeding the sightline would make counting them all difficult anyway.

He turned to see a Brute that had a silver dorsal stripe, and frowned. The rest of the beast was a dark brown, making the silver look like a kind of colored interruption. Shaking his head, he turned from the bloodied and torn carcass to see an empty splash of violet blood at the base of a crate that had been dented badly. Dented in the shape of Sangheili body armor.

Dial looked back towards the Brute he had seen, and started in alarm.

The carcass was gone, without traces of drag marks.

**\*\*Chapter Four, part three:\*\***

**\*\*0530 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

Hoku Zimivee. The name meant nothing to him, and that detail he found odd- he had thought he knew most of the operatives in his line of work, but unless this one was somehow either a new recruit on an assignment that he wasn't notified of or he had been there all along as some kind of sleeper cell agent.

Any of the above possibilities disturbed him. There was nothing save the kid's actions over the past few hours that even hinted that he might be connected. MÃ¼n Gazenee understood one thing better than some of his peers; if a situation didn't immediately expose all the angles to his expert eye, then something else and much worse was likely very wrong.

"Who are you?" Even his Leaders couldn't have accomplished this sort of chaos and destruction at the age of the warrior in front of him. MÃ¼n didn't expect any reply, hadn't spoken to garner one- the only soul within earshot was incapable of speech at the moment, unconscious as he was.

MÃ¼n Gazenee wondered where he had come from, who he was, why he was aboard- he remembered finding him on the Command deck, assisting him there- and he hadn't stopped berating himself since for assuming he was a fellow member of the same underground group that MÃ¼n Gazenee was; the Mirratorde.

Hoku Zimivee wasn't even a name that sounded somewhat familiar- there was no recollection to access, nothing he could remember about this character from before the encounter under the eyes of the Brute's leader- a nasty and cunning sombitch known as the Butcher, or more commonly just by his name, Throug.

MÃ¼n Gazenee had tried to follow the younger Elite, when he left the Command deck, but he had been in such a hurry he had outpaced MÃ¼n almost immediately- and when he got to the end of the trail, he had found nothing more than a closed dock door and a headless Brute. At that point it had been prudent to assume what he had. Zimivee was outside, had made it- he was certainly going fast enough. He remembered being awed at the sheer speed of the youth, amazed by how when he got moving, there was nothing, not even MÃ¼n, who could catch him. At first he had thought he had the same sort of cloaking device that MÃ¼n had, until he finally found him again, and discovered due to his inanimate condition and visibility that it was actually a pair of alternating devices that were both standard grade.

He was cleverâ€¦ adaptive, maybe even a little too smart for his own good. MÃ¼n had spoken briefly with a field master, before coming here, but he hadn't expected anyone to accompany him and had only realized he was trapped aboard the vessel apparently \_after\_ his mystery companion had. And if that be the case, even this fellow had been slow on the ball, if he needed to fly that fast to reach his exit in time.

As a precaution, MÃ¼n had tethered Zimivee's hands, not to mark him as a prisoner, but to keep him from jumping awake in a panic attack due to the circumstances MÃ¼n had pulled him from. Four Brutes, it was amazing. Four of them, all at once, and without firing a shot, definitely without aid of a sword or any other weapon, for that matter. MÃ¼n was still shaking his head at the intensity of the action. How many could do that? He hadn't tried it personally, but then he had never found himself in a situation to need to- he was more careful than that. If he thought about it, he decided he could not, in fact, pull it off. He wasn't good enough for that. He had learned a special fighting technique, and it made him very hard to beat by those that didn't know it, but sitting in the small, darkened room now and watching this new mystery player, MÃ¼n Gazenee decided firmly the last thing he would ever want would be to have to fight that kid.

Whoever he was, he was more than he seemed. But at the same time, he was pretty torn up, if still alive and suffering nothing fatal. MÃ¼n shook his head, again, still having a hard time wrapping his mind around the swirling circumstances. First he was not as alone as he thought, then the abilities of the youth before him began to pile on, first his speed then his level of dangerous, and not to mention the swath of dead Brutes he had carved through the middle of the ship. And all, MÃ¼n noted, without being seen or getting caught. MÃ¼n himself had had difficulty at first determining why there were so many dead when there appeared no actual conflict of interests within the Jiralhanae command structure. So far, the only friction was between the Brute commander and his whelp, who wanted the position.

"Am I dead?"

MÃ¼n returned his mind to the present, and his gaze to his captive audience. He smiled, slightly amused. "No."

Zimivee's face wrinkled. "Where am I?"

"Hidden- safe, for the time being."

He turned his head, and looked back at the agent. "That's not fair."

Surprised, MÃ¼n cocked his head. "What isn't?"

"I was looking all over for you. How come you found me so easily?"

"Maybe because you were just close enough that all I had to do was turn around, and there you were." MÃ¼n answered. "You are either the most idiotic or the bravest soul in the Covenant, though I must admit."

Zimivee squinted at him, before pressing himself into a sitting position. "What does that purple bar on your shoulder mean?"

MÃ¼n shook his head. "In time. I need to know if you are trustworthy before I trust you."

Zimivee nodded. "Fair enough." He looked down at his hands, but what

MÃ¼n expected from him next never happened- instead he surprised him yet again, by lifting his hands and biting the ties around his wrists so they loosened enough for him to slip free of them. Taking the binding from his mandibles, he flung them at MÃ¼n. "You realize, I hope, that by that gesture you have a long way to go to get that trust?"

MÃ¼n looked at the binding. Then at Zimivee. "Who \_are\_ you??"

Zimivee shook his head. "If you won't tell me, I won't tell you."

"You are the only one I have ever known to take down four Brutes by yourself without any sort of weaponry at hand." MÃ¼n insisted. "I don't even know how you did it. Didn't they fight you?"

"Of course they fought me. No one wants to die. I just wasn't inclined to give them that option." Zimivee circled one wrist with the other hand, looking down at the floor between MÃ¼n's hooves as he did so. He knew he had won that fight by the skin on his teeth, but if he let this awestruck fellow know that, he was liable to wind up worse off than before- with one of his own to contend with, not just the Brutes aboard. "So what is a special operations Elite doing out here alone?" He raised his gaze to meet MÃ¼n's. "Where is your team?"

MÃ¼n hid a cringe. He was very observant- and anything, even the tiniest slip, might blow the whole thing wide open. His group was a secret, and secrets don't stay secret for long when in the presence of people like Zimivee. He might or might not share, but that was a risk too big to justify taking right now. "I'm it." He answered- it was an honest answer, but given the circumstances it was liable to be the only one. Anything else might be needing editing, which would make it all lies. There was no such thing as a half-truth in the eyes of the Mirratorid.

"Just you, then? What's the mission? Sit around and watch while everyone dies? You cannot possibly hope to accomplish much when you're alone." Zimivee scolded. "Which is why I was seeking you out to begin with."

"Ah, well, there you have it." MÃ¼n replied. "It's just me and you, but we aren't alone, now are we? There is a whole ship filled with Brutes to keep us company."

Zimivee snarled at him. "I don't care what or who you are. If you work for them, or if you hesitate to kill them, I will kill \_you\_."

MÃ¼n cocked his head. "Now why would that be?"

"They murdered the High Council. On top of that they came here to kill us too."

MÃ¼n nodded, his expression somber. "I know."

"Then why haven't you been killing them? There are plenty enough to go around." Zimivee protested.

"What makes you think I haven't?" MÃ¼n shot back. "What makes you think you can come here into the territory assigned me and interrupt my mission, just to scold me like some child for not doing as I \_have\_ been doing for the entire voyage of this vessel??" He had raised his voice, but as soon as he finished and the silence returned he regretted it- someone might have heard.

"Quietly!" Zimivee hissed. "Do not allow your passions to rule you. Even I cannot combat a whole ship's worth of Brutes and win. You will have them kill us both with your shouting."

MÃ¼n sighed. "I did not mean to become loud. You forced it from me."

Zimivee was about to protest the statement when he suddenly turned around and said something entirely else that sent MÃ¼n back on his heels. Cooling his expression as well as his tone, Zimivee answered, "I apologize for inciting your anger. But I will not waste time with bickering. There isn't time for thatâ€|"

Astonished yet again by the seeming wisdom within the youth, MÃ¼n was speechless for a moment. In the time it took him to gather his thoughts, Zimivee added,

"What is your mission?"

MÃ¼n shook his head in an attempt to clear it. "Elimination of the leader faction of the Brutes. But the order in which they must fall is so meticulous that it is taking foreverâ€| and now the next one that must go is out of reach."

Zimivee spared some time to think about that. "The sonâ€| Doaedamet."

MÃ¼n cast him a look, but it changed when he remembered the youth before him had already been around a bit. He nodded. "Yes, him. If his father falls while he is still alive, he will assume command and the ripple effect will be disastrous."

"He cannot assume anything as long as he does not know." Zimivee offered.

MÃ¼n committed the Elite he was looking at to a moment of study before replying. "What had you in mind?"

Zimivee tipped his head. "Kill him anyway, and worry about Doaedamet when he turns up. He is aboard the \_Radiant,\_ after all."

MÃ¼n nodded, but not in complete agreement. "He is at that, but while you did disable the command protocols for motion in this place, you failed to also disconnect the communications array. He will know as soon as someone turns to him for orders when Throug is dead."

Zimivee paused. "Throug?"

"Yes."

"I need to know something else, before you and I begin anything in the remote department of cooperative operations." Zimivee said.

"If it isn't something I cannot in good conscience give you, I will answer to the best of my knowledge." MÃ¼n replied.

"If you don't know the answer, no one does." Zimivee told him. "I wanted something to call you by. Your name."

MÃ¼n nodded. That he could part with. Not a big deal. It wasn't as if there was a list somewhere with all the names of the members of the Mirrator on it. "I am MÃ¼n Gazenee."

Zimivee opened his mouth, but shut it again a moment later to try again with something else. "I suppose you already had plenty of time to look me up, didn't you."

"I did." MÃ¼n answered. "But it told me little to nothing of you. You are more than you seem, Hoku Zimivee. I begin to suspect you may have as many or more secrets than even I." When Zimivee started to speak again, MÃ¼n held up a hand. "I will not ask for them if you do not ask for mine. Do we have a deal?"

Zimivee just nodded, silent.

"Now. Exactly how do you plan to pull off your proposed action?"

He received a shrug. "I tend to wing it, most times. Plans go awry-when operating without one, and on the basis of a mere set goal, things do tend to go smoother."

MÃ¼n laughed. "I like your philosophy."

"It doesn't often go as I would like, however, when I have to take orders from someone who happens to have a plan." Zimivee amended. "Which is always."

"You ought to come up in the world soon." MÃ¼n assured him, before rising from his seated place on the floor, and walking to the door. Zimivee watched his motions, feeling the skin on the back of his head pulling tight. Here was a professional, a killer, someone who no one messed with that lived. And Zimivee had argued with him. He kept his face clear, when MÃ¼n turned back to look at him from the still-closed door, but inside there was a terrible knot in his gut that would undoubtedly make things difficult. Suddenly he wasn't so sure he wanted this Elite's companyâ€¦

"Get up, we haven't all day. A patrol comes through here every seven hours andâ€¦"

Zimivee didn't let him finish, rising and meeting him by the door. "I was out that long?"

"No." MÃ¼n sighed. "After I found you and fixed you up, there was less than a three hour time lag before you woke. I just want to be long ago gone from here before they arrive so there is no longer any residual scent of either of us when they do."

"One more question."

MÃ¼n frowned at him.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"Doing what, exactly?"

"Hiding out on enemy ships killing command staff."

"Never before. Maybe a week."

"I meant in general."

MÃ¼n shook his head. "Eventually, Zimivee, you will get yourself killed for asking too many questions into the wrong departments."

"How long?" Zimivee insisted.

"Thirty years, thirty one, maybe. Why is it important?"

"Good, you know what you're doing. You lead." Zimivee said.

MÃ¼n rolled his eyes. "Good grief." He touched the locking mechanism on the door control and it slid open, detecting them near it and permitting passage. Zimivee watched as MÃ¼n faded from sight while walking through the door into the hall, and activated one of his own cloaking devices before following.

## 5. The Council's Right Hand

**\*\*Chapter Five, part one:\*\***

**\*\*0615 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

He held what resembled a slender rod that had been shaped slightly to the form of his hand, so it was easy to hold, but the item, while tending towards the same genre as the rest of the stuff he carried, held no obvious sign of being a weapon.

It was as if it were just a shaped piece of metal, but Zimivee knew better than to let himself be convinced of that. MÃ¼n Gazenee had yet to activate the device, but he was holding it like he meant to use it somehow on something sometime soon. Zimivee was attentive more than his usual for his curiosity, wanting to find out what it was, what it did, when or if that happened. At the moment, he held only one of them, but he had two, oddly enough, the other on his belt, adhered by the micro-grappler hooks that were on nearly all standard grade arms.

Along the route the two Elites had taken, Zimivee had noted each and every side passage and wayward personnel they had come within sight of, certain if anything went wrong he would need that information to aid in his flight from the scene. He wasn't stupid- any action other than running away was suicide when faced with a room filled with Brutes. Especially, he mused, when one was all alone. He hoped MÃ¼n was being as observant, but if he was it wasn't an obvious attribute.

The Sangheili confused him; what \_was\_ obvious was he had been in the business of backstabbing for a great long while- what wasn't was his methods. MÃ¼n was the sort of warrior that one understood as

being nonexistent. He did things without credit, moved without being seen, acted under orders that had never been given. He was the convenient solution to what was otherwise a terrible sore that had no cure.

Still, given this, Zimivee had expected him to have obtained an excellent judge of character, or at least be able to read one's eyes. How else could he have lasted that long in this business? Zimivee had been utterly astounded at just how wrong the fellow had been about him. He had nothing to hide, no secrets, no shady past—truth be told he hadn't been alive long enough to get into anything that deep. He wasn't terribly young, but he'd been told more than once that he was young for his position. And if Mān was any better at predicting the future than he was at judging character, that little tidbit would probably be a mainstay throughout his career. Zimivee smiled to himself, realizing how silly it all seemed—because he had none, he could never tell his secrets, would never slip, was incapable of falling out of character. Hoku Zimivee would be Hoku Zimivee regardless of the situation. He only had the one face to wear.

And that right there, by itself, would only serve to convince Mān further that he was just like himself, only better at it. Zimivee watched as the Brute ambled past, three of his clan mates tramping along in his wake. After they had gone, and the hall was clear again, Zimivee reached out, and swatted at the air behind Mān. He had learned already not to touch the Elite when he wasn't expecting any physical contact— he tended to overreact when that happened.

Responding to the unusual air current, Mān turned his head; it was the sort of attention Zimivee preferred over being attacked. Quietly he posed his question to the older warrior. "I realize you may not consider this the time, but I do, so I have to ask— what are you going to do with me when your mission is finished, given that you don't exist and your mission doesn't, either?"

Mān frowned at him for a moment, checked the hall, then turned around to face Zimivee fully. "Listen, kid, I don't need your help." He stated, baldly. "As long as you don't get in my way, you'll be fine. Don't attract attention to yourself or to me, and we won't be seeing one another again, am I clear?"

Zimivee frowned right back. "By that— we won't be seeing one another again— you mean you won't need to come back to kill me?"

Mān sighed, frustrated. "Don't play dumb with me, Zimivee. I don't need to be told to see you aren't that shallow. Either shut up and keep pace, or back off and get out of my sight."

Zimivee fought down the urge to snarl at him. They weren't friends, weren't even on friendly terms, but this pseudo-hostility was beginning to get on his nerves. "Don't address me as if I were a child."

Mān shook his head. "I'm in a little over my head, and you sank me deeper in. Do not tempt my already raw temper. The right thing for me to have done when I found you was to have killed you on the spot, and you know it. You have complicated my mission. And that alone makes you my enemy."



"Your enemy! Your enemy has done more to ensure the survival of our brothers onboard the Radiant than you have! Do not judge me when you don't even know me, and trust me when I say you do not know me."

"I am fully aware how little of you I understand, Zimivee. Do not try to goad me into another pointless argument. We are wasting time." MÃ¼n turned away, then, and resumed his walk. Zimivee spared a moment to growl to himself, looking off down a hall to the side, before breathing deep and trotting off after the grumpy warrior. If relations got any worse he knew he would never forgive himself for seeking MÃ¼n's company. He was the last person in the known territories Zimivee wanted to be near, and the last person he could enjoy working with.

MÃ¼n was interesting, but MÃ¼n was cold. Exact and precise, and guarded even in the best of company. Zimivee understood he had been given a bit more trust than MÃ¼n was accustomed to granting, but he wasn't about to corner himself against all things spare himself. He had enough enemies, and he knew it.

A Brute appeared up ahead, pausing in the hall where he could block the whole thing. The beast crossed his hairy arms, and surveyed the juncture he was standing in before curling his lip in a silent snarl down the corridor to his fore. "I smell Elite scum."

Zimivee cocked his head, but forewent any opinion of the statement of his own in favor of seeing what MÃ¼n thought of it. The Elite turned slightly to see Zimivee instead, as if thinking the same thing he was- get his companion's reaction before pursuing any action of his own. Zimivee wanted to laugh, but withheld the urge in favor of tipping his head at the agent.

MÃ¼n made a silent grunt of either disinterest or confirmation of a theory he had already come to, and turned back to see the Jiralhanae as it unfolded its arms and began to tromp past them. Inside the moment they were shoulder to shoulder, MÃ¼n's unusual palm-rod sparked to life and spun around in his hand. Zimivee's mouth opened in surprise at the device; it was the oddest looking energy sword he had seen yet, but it was indeed an energy sword. Rather than two accompanying blades of energy the width of a filament and the breadth of his palm at the starting end tapering down to a point four feet later, this blade was straight as a ruler, with a mere foot's length on one end and four inches on the other, past the tip of the rod in MÃ¼n's hand. There was no second accompanying blade opposite the first of the rod.

Turning the blade from its original position with the long end following his arm to his elbow, MÃ¼n poked the skinny thing through the Brute's side in a single viper-strike move before rotating it back again and turning it off. The Brute winced once, burred something that didn't really get to leave its mouth, and crumpled in its tracks.

Zimivee stared at it in horror. The energy had a circumference, rather than a breadth and width, and the size of the hole MÃ¼n had made was no bigger than one of his fingers- and with only a foot's worth of length, his aim had needed to be more than perfect to have stabbed the middle right out of the Brute's heart. He cleared his

expression before looking up, but gained a new one- frustration- when he saw MÃ¼n had vanished from the area again. Zimivee wished he had a sword, but he would have been happy with one of the standard grade ones- by the way MÃ¼n had handled his odd version of the otherwise common weapon, Zimivee guessed it would be by far more difficult to learn to use. One would not dare flex one's wrist with sharp energy like that so close to one's arm.

Zimivee breathed a sigh, and stepped past the Brute's body, not really that interested in finding MÃ¼n again when relations were not that desirable anyway. Alone again and this time in no real mood for company, Zimivee moved through the ship on a mission all his own. If MÃ¼n wasn't going to do what he claimed was his job, then Zimivee would. At first he encountered mild resistance as he tried to go for the command decks, but found quickly the reason for all the activity surrounding the area was due in near precise fault to his being there. Someone had gotten smart overnight, and though they still didn't know where or who, the Brutes now knew what, and they were looking for him. Hopefully, they didn't also know there was more than one, or that they were currently at a bit of odds with one another.

Zimivee didn't much like MÃ¼n Gazenee, but he wouldn't betray him. Still, the same might not be said for MÃ¼n. Who knew what his loyalties were. And at current Zimivee wasn't even sure if he wasn't working for the Brutes to begin with. Some agents would go to impossible lengths to appear as they were not- like MÃ¼n's killing of the Brute in front of Zimivee.

If someone were to ask him, he might just hand over any information for a pat on the back and go back to work. Zimivee couldn't trust MÃ¼n any more than MÃ¼n could trust Zimivee. Anything MÃ¼n had against him could easily be his undoing, but at the moment he couldn't have cared any less. Here he was, pretty much isolated inside the enemy's territory, caught between a ship hull and a wall of Brutes, with only his wit and his determination- and sometimes his fear- between him and oblivion.

He supposed if he were caught now, \_after\_ causing so much trouble, the Brutes wouldn't be so kind as to let him die. Any and all frustration he had caused would then be taken out on him, maybe one of them would want to tear his limbs off him while he was conscious. Zimivee wore a grim smile into the Command Deck, wore it all the way up the ramp to the flank of the commander of the whole problem; Throug.

The Jiralhanae in the chamber looked mostly busy with whatever tasks they had taken on themselves, but Throug looked nothing if not bored. His gaze moved from the holographic displays almost immediately when Zimivee got close. The young Elite stood no less than two paces from him, and he had caught the scent of Sangheili within the same moment it took for Zimivee to come to a stop.

A moment later, Throug turned to see right through the Elite, a puzzled look on his face. Zimivee considered his expression for a time, then decided it really didn't matter- the beast would be dead soon and so would all his followers. Every one on the ship would die, until there were no more. If he had to he would wait for his fellows on the \_Radiant\_ to come get him, because he knew it took more than one lone soul to pilot the cruiser. If MÃ¼n ever got in the way he

would likely wind up sorry he had.

Zimivee had had enough. He didn't like the idea of being at odds with the agent, but there was nothing going to stop him from completing his mission, however self-appointed it may have been.

**\*\*Chapter Five, part two:\*\***

**\*\*0615 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Parts of the view were obscured, but what he could see seemed clearly rendered enough, so he spared a moment to study it. At first, while the image was out of focus, it looked foreign and alien to him, but it was fascinating- and after it had come into focus, he realized it was just the pattern in the ceiling above him. His senses jolted when he realized he was lying down, and began to reel as he fought down the urge to jump to his hooves and survey his surroundings.

If he was alive- and he certainly hurt well enough to be- then that meant he had been missed, and he would do well to not change that until he had gotten a better picture of his circumstances. So far all he could hear was silence, the occasional bubbly noise of the muted boiling the engines made through the conduits running in the ceiling above him.

Enin 'Lygotee carefully and slowly turned his head, not wanting to alert any enemy of his condition- that of being still alive- before he was prepared for it. His expression turned perplexed when he realized he seemed to be the only one in the room, and the room happened to be a medical quarter. If the healer was about, they were being very quiet. Feeling capable, 'Lygotee pressed into a seated position, and propped back on his hands to look around better. None of the details made much sense- if this was indeed a medical quarter, why was he the only one in it? Doubtless there were others who had been hit, wounded.

Right when he had swung his legs over the side of the flat he'd apparently been placed on, the door to the room slid open and several warriors filed in, each who was capable of walking on their own carrying a fellow who wasn't, but they all passed 'Lygotee without so much as looking at him. Curious, the Commander pressed from the flat and walked after them, to watch as the wounded were laid out for care and the stubborn ones went back out to scrape more fellows off the deck plating.

Unless his memory failed him, he knew pretty much where he was- and he left the medical quarter with another destination in mind. Finding the corridors of choice took longer than getting to the aforesaid destination did, but he arrived in the much-fought-over docking bay before it was very cleaned out. Elites wandered here and there, some looking at the various bloodstains smeared across the crates and the floor, others picking up the bodies that weren't moving anymore, the little Unggoy darting about between them, scraping up the smelly corpses of the fallen Brutes and dragging them off for either cremation and introduction into the soil in Hydroponics, or ejection into vacuum. 'Lygotee watched the quiet procession of cleanup with a sense of closure. What had happened was overwith; and there would likely be no more bloodshed here.

It was an odd feeling. There was no guarantee that the Brutes would

not try to retake the bays, or that some residual item of their dominion here wouldn't cause some sort of backfiring that would cause more heartburn. 'Lygotee lifted his gaze to the decks above, and saw a flash of gold, but it wasn't just golden anymore. The i\_Radiant\_/i's Commander had seen something rather rough, and wore a kind of odd blue-brown stain on his armor, the dried residues of Sangheili blood. He walked without a limp, though, or any other kind of pain-induced hunch, casting orders and issuing commands with as much gusto as prior the whole event.

'Lygotee paused, sensing someone approaching his position, and smiled to himself before turning to watch them come. As he had suspected, it was 'Lavuree, and the Elite wore a number of interesting looking dents. For sure they had not come from any crate or any Brute's fists. His gait wasn't straight, but it wasn't off by much.

"Leader."

'Lygotee tilted his head. "Is it to you that I owe my life this day, 'Lavuree?"

The Elite smiled oddly. He looked almost sad. "We are both forever in that debt, Commander- do not presume to repay what you never can. You owe me too many times as do I you. What have you seen of 'Pohamee?"

Dread immediately replaced his previous amusement. He had seen nothing of either of his remaining teammates until 'Lavuree's approach, and the means of the mention made him wonder if 'Lavuree was asking if he had seen 'Pohamee's remains. "Nothing at all. I had not seen anything of either of you until now."

'Lavuree gave his mandibles a speculative scratch. "Neither have I, Leader. I grow weary of searching."

Which meant little better than 'Lygotee had at first thought. 'Lavuree likely meant to say he had seen all the collected survivors and hadn't found their teammate, but had yet to look over the dead for a reluctance to find him there. 'Lygotee couldn't blame him, really, but it would never rest until he knew for sure and had borne witness to the evidence.

'Lavuree spared their surroundings a look before issuing a weary sigh. "Many have fallen this day, Leader."

"Many more shall before this is over, 'Lavuree- we are strong, but we are not invincible and there are yet more Brutes to face." 'Lygotee replied. "Only keep faith that we should prevail, and we just might."

'Lavuree cocked his head at his Commander. "They still outnumber us, and I wonder if you have forgotten that they have a war vessel that we do not?"

The mention made 'Lygotee frown, remembering the start of the current conflict, and the spy that he had sent that never came back. He had been by no means weak or naïve, but looking back 'Lygotee realized it had been foolish to send one so young and lacking so much experience to do a job like that. Still, though he was gone, he at

least had accomplished the mission first- something to be proud of and to bring his family honor. 'Lavuree wasn't looking at him anymore, something else having gained his attention somewhere across the bay. At first 'Lygotee was content to let him look at it without comment, but after it failed to then lose the Elite's attention shortly, it piqued 'Lygotee's own curiosity, and the faraway something got his attention too.

"What are you looking at?"

"I spy the Supreme Commander doing a most unusual thing." Came the answer.

'Lygotee stepped closer to his teammate, unable to see anything of the kind from where he was. Indeed when he had adjusted his vantage, he too saw what 'Lavuree had mentioned. Dial M'akamee was rather animatedly beating on a crate that looked very broken. The four Elites at his flanks seemed to think the inanimate object was merely getting what it deserved, but the scene made no sense to anyone else watching. "By the Rings- has he gone completely mad?"

The comment made 'Lavuree smile- he looked at his Commander. "No, Leader- it is cleaning detail. Observe what happens when he gets the crate open." He gestured in the direction of the calamity. 'Lygotee only frowned speculatively at him, but he did as bid- and when the beleaguered box finally broke open, the contents expanded, and some of it flew for the ceiling of the bay. Plasma fire followed it up, burning the Yanime'e down as fast as they went up. He heard a responding snarl from one of the Elites shooting at them, when those that had had the chance concentrated their fire on one of their antagonists.

'Lygotee frowned. "They're keeping the drones in the crates? That's something of a strange practice."

'Lavuree nodded, picking at a dried flake of blood on his armor. "Brutes are as Brutes do, Leader, but don't ask me to explain \_why\_ they do the things they do."

'Lygotee sighed. "We should find 'Pohamee."

"Why?" 'Lavuree asked, sounding as though the location of the Elite in question was no big mystery.

'Lygotee frowned at him. "I do wish you would stop this nonsense. What do you know that I don't, suddenly?"

'Lavuree laughed. "That's him, there, with the Supreme Commander. Kicking bugs and swapping ideas." He pointed, indicating a warrior that looked nothing like 'Pohamee at all until he looked up and over at Dial to respond to something he had said. The sideways motion was trademark of 'Pohamee, slightly exaggerated due to an injury to his left tricep. 'Lygotee squinted. He looked different due to an armor change- which was rather odd considering 'Pohamee thought of his armor as something he owned and he was as liable to discard it or bits of it as 'Lygotee was to discard his skin in favor of wearing Jiralhanae hide. The Elite had always been a little odd that way, seeking to protect his armor rather than allow it to protect him.

'Lavuree somehow gained the Elite's attention and waved him over. When he got close enough, 'Lygotee noticed why he had been so hard to recognize. He wore pieces from four different suits, and none of them were in reasonable condition. It looked like he had been swapping out ruined pieces for ones in better condition off other Elites, though the practice seemed something 'Pohamee wasn't liable to do.

"Where have you been hiding? I was looking everywhere for you."  
'Lavuree scolded. "And what is this? Who gave you that ridiculous get-up?"

'Pohamee smiled grimly. "Much of it is salvage. I seem to have become an explosives magnet, and this only suited our plans once I realized it. Still, even using it to my advantage proved hazardous. How fast can you get out of your armor, 'Lavuree?"

He gave that some thought. "I don't know. I've never had to escape it in a pinch."

'Pohamee laughed. "Eight seconds."

'Lygotee's eyes popped. "By the gods! How do you manage?"

"Sometimes, I didn't." 'Pohamee shrugged. "But when you have four grenades adhered to you and three more inbound, you learn to be quick really fast."

"You appear to be in good health." 'Lygotee mentioned. "Seems to me you were quick enough."

'Pohamee shook his head. "It was harrowing, but I managed. Still, the armor I had to throw was more explosive than the grenades stuck to it- one of my bracers vaporized, I think."

"Good to know you haven't lost your edge, 'Pohamee. Better, to know you're still alive." 'Lygotee said. "How many of these crates have Yanime'e in them? Do we know?"

"No, but so far it has only been the one. I'm more curious to know if we have a plan to access the Brutes?"

"Nothing short of extracurricular travel will gain us access to that quarter- this station was built to withstand explosive decompression in more than one quadrant at once. They're sealed in good enough to keep breathing even if we vent." 'Lavuree said. "If you look at the construction prints, the air ducting in the cross sections between quadrants also seal shut when the doors do. Simply put, the \_Radiant\_ was too well-built to give anyone an advantage in this kind of situation. Both sides of this conflict are stuck facing a bottle-neck."

"How do you \_know\_ all this material justâ€¦ off the wall like that?" 'Pohamee asked. "You must have amazing memory."

'Lygotee laughed. "That's why we love him, 'Pohamee." He punched 'Lavuree's shoulder. "Walking archive, this one."

'Lavuree grimaced, baring all his teeth at his Commander.  
"Ow."

**\*\*Chapter Five, part three:\*\***

**\*\*0735 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

MÃ¼n Gazenee stepped around the cooling body of the fallen Jiralhanae and past, moving for the nearest door inside the corridor he was in. If there was one thing the rather brash young Elite had taught him it was that the fewer Brutes there were aboard when Throug fell the fewer he would need to contend with when the chaos got started. It simply hadn't occurred to him to bother with them much spare the ones that gave him trouble before. It occurred to him then as he passed the inter-passage barrier that he ought to check on Zimivee, but when he retraced his steps and surveyed the paths he thought might have been taken by the mysterious agent, he found the sneak had completely ditched him and left him shamefully clueless of his whereabouts.

Irate, MÃ¼n began to search deeper down each corridor, hoping to catch up quickly enough to stop or at least stall any madness the youth planned to enact. Zimivee might be an agent, and he might be the best of the bunch in history, but he was still young and still thought like a youth, unseasoned and untried by the hardships and frustrations of the veteran. It seemed, though, that he had his ways of getting around even that- especially if he could be such a pain in MÃ¼n's side- and having it all his way despite.

"Where are you?" MÃ¼n muttered, seeing his plotted path had yielded nothing. Zimivee was gone- but there was nothing to indicate he had left the ship. Which meant MÃ¼n was slipping, or Zimivee was better at what he did than MÃ¼n gave him credit for.

Either was frightening, a prospect MÃ¼n preferred not to envision. Still, the longer he knew the kid and the more he learned about him, the less MÃ¼n liked him and the more he respected him. This was becoming more than a pain- it was ridiculous. MÃ¼n knew how good he was, but nothing he came up with seemed to even come close to what Zimivee dared to do. Maybe he was just that goodâ€¦

MÃ¼n almost suffered cardiac failure when an alarm screamed in his ear, the ship systems activated to allow all hands to be aware of what could only be Zimivee- an intruder had been found. Recovered from the initial shock of the sound blaring at him to begin with, MÃ¼n decided on a location within the span of a heartbeat and headed in that direction shortly after. The whole ship had just become one giant enemy and he couldn't keep it at bay for long. There was just one good thing to the whole mess- they were after Zimivee, not Gazenee.

Still, MÃ¼n would be shot just as fast as Hoku for the simple fact of being born Sangheili. This seemed the only thing the two of them had in common, though, as he had found that they just couldn't get along at all. MÃ¼n arrived at Command as high strung as he had been in years, anticipating a firefight. What he found was a giant heap of decomposing Throug, which didn't help his mood much, as the whole room was in a frenzy much akin to headless chickens that weighed five hundred pounds each and became angry and destructive when disoriented.

MÃ¼n snarled at the mess that had been made of the Command platform,

previously holding position over the rest of the bridge and now resting directly on it, tipped down off the snapped ramp that had previously led up to where Throug had liked to stay. The noise garnered several responding growls from the Brutes around him, but MÃ¼n ignored them. Where was Zimivee, the presumptuous bastard? And what, by the Rings, had he done to snap the Command platform in half like that? At least he had completely destroyed the Brutes' communications capabilities until someone jury-rigged something somewhere else.

Which meant even though Zimivee was getting ahead of himself, and in MÃ¼n's way, he at least had had the presence of mind to clean up after his mess. Or, at least, to keep it from becoming a bigger one. MÃ¼n heaved a frustrated sigh. Kidsâ€¦

Hoku Zimivee pushed up from the floor, dazed and a little disoriented. After giving his head a shake to clear it, he looked around, before gathering his legs beneath him. More things hurt than he thought he owned a right to, but he knew he was alive by them. What perplexed him was how he had ended up beneath the fallen Command platform. It had taken him a moment to realize that that was where he was, but after that he could only wonder why. It was just as well, he mused, as he had become quite visible and the Command deck was crawling with more Brutes than he remembered being there. Zimivee spared a moment to investigate the slick hot moisture on his helmet before moving further, and frowned when he found it to be his own blood.

Funny, but he didn't seem to have any injury on his headâ€¦ still, it was something of note and he would need to remember it later if he ever found himself lightheaded. Taking a breath, Zimivee pulled his lower half from under the crumbled part of the fallen platform, and pushed aside a loosened piece to pass into open area. He paused when he realized he had forgotten to see if his cloaking devices had cooled enough for use, the tell being the fact that two Brutes were staring at him, each wearing expressions akin to utter disbelief. Zimivee spared enough breath for an expletive before both lifted their plasma rifles to fire at him.

Quickly he withdrew into the hole from whence he had meant to come, avoiding the inevitable coating of plasma, but it burned a hole through the materials behind where he had been. This quickly became a bad thing when the platform began to shift, settling closer to the floor and decreasing the amount of space Zimivee had in which to fit.

"Oh, no." Zimivee complained, placing a hand on the metal above him and pressing, even though he knew he could never hope to hold the thing up- it was nearly solid metal and more than eleven times his size in cubic mass. Still, the Brutes had his only perceivable exit filled with plasma, which was further complicating the matter by being a severe solvent to the metal beneath the parts above Zimivee. The whole thing would sink into a pool of slag sometime soon, and it would squash Zimivee beneath it.

He snarled at his circumstances, aware there was little he could do- his shield engine was shot, smashed in the collapse. Finally, the fire stopped, but the place it had been was so hot now he dared not get near it. Still, the platform continued to sink, leaving him fewer options for scrutiny. When he heard a Brute's grenade launcher fire



and the grenade subsequently detonate, he darted for his fast-closing exit and slammed hard into the metal on the left as he tried to sail past the molten hot spot. He didn't quite clear it, but he rolled free of the falling platform without further injury, clear of immediate danger until another Brute or two decided to finish him.

Zimivee clawed at the wall he came against, seeking his hooves, and turned to see the rest of the room. Directly after he had turned to look, he saw his only Elite companion snap into view as his shielding took a direct hit from a grenade. Zimivee gaped. MÃ¼n!

Worse, despite all his deft dodging, they had his position saturated and were giving him no room to maneuver. He couldn't last. Forgetting his personal agony for a moment in a spike of anger, Zimivee thrust himself at the nearest Brute and reached over its head. When his fingers found its nose, he sank them in and yanked back, tearing the Brute's head in half and off its shoulders, leaving the jaw still attached to its neck.

That accomplished, Zimivee tore the weapon from its hands as it fell, turned about and fired it point blank at the Brute beside him. The whole room's compliment had gathered at MÃ¼n, determined to kill him, but they erupted into disorganized chaos when they realized they were being assailed from behind. Zimivee ducked into a roll, avoiding the first volley of launcher grenades, but a hand-flung plasma grenade met him at the end when he stood up. Zimivee snarled at the thrower, ripped the adhered section of his ruined armor from his person and flung it back at the offending Brute.

The shrapnel embedded in the Brute's hide, exploding shortly thereafter and taking out a comrade as well. Zimivee dropped to a knee and fired as many rounds in succession as the rifle he'd swiped would allow. When it was overheated, he darted across the room to meet MÃ¼n, aware the other Elite was being hammered.

Zimivee didn't stop- he sailed in, sank his claws into MÃ¼n's arm, and sailed out without stopping or changing direction. MÃ¼n coiled around the new ache, snatching Zimivee's hand and plucking it off, so the two of them separated in time for a plasma grenade to sail cleanly between them, missing both. Zimivee pulled up short and spun, firing the last of the battery into the crowd of pursuing Brutes, aware he needed to clean the room if he intended either of them to escape alive. A glance at MÃ¼n told him he had to hurry; the Elite was in the middle of a spasm, brought on by the introduction of flak to a nerve cluster.

Swiping a stray grenade from the floor, Zimivee primed it and selected his target as the one that kept minding his proximity- the one that preferred his fellows be in front of him so he never got hit by any plasma. Through a keyhole the grenade sailed, impacting and adhering to the Brute's ammo belts. Zimivee wasn't disappointed when the beast roared in fury at his fate- though had he the mind he could have changed it- and dropped to his knuckles to charge forward rather than tearing off the ammo belt to save himself. He managed to shoulder past his comrades before it detonated, but he was still too near them to save them from his fate, and blew down the two he didn't kill as well as killing three along with himself. Using the lull in the fire to gain an edge, Zimivee spared a look at his equipment belt to see if a cloaking engine was operational. Finding one of them was,

he activated it, so when the two remaining Jiralhanae recovered their wits and their feet, they didn't see him.

Mã¼n Gazenee watched through hazy eyes, half-aware, as the Brutes began to converge on his position. It didn't really matter that much- he had no outstanding desire to die, but excepting Doademet, his mission was complete and if it killed him he at least would die with his secrets. Neither Brute quite made it to him, though one was holding his launcher like he meant to strike with the blade on the back.

Searing hot bright energy sliced the air, segmenting the hirsute duo as a hot knife through butter might go. Bits of Brute flew across the room as the wielder of the energy blades moved with an almost perfect grace between them. The doors opened, more of the crew filing in, attracted by the commotion, but these too failed to effect much damage to anything beyond one another as Zimivee flew at them and cut among them. An almost serene smile crossed Mã¼n's features as he watched the little thief using his blades- backwards, he noted- as the last weapon he could get his hands on that worked against the enemy. He could hear the next wave coming through the vibrational quality in the floor, but he knew if they ever arrived his strange non-friend wouldn't be able to fend them off.

Having had a moment to gather his wits, Mã¼n pried his aching, broken carcass from the floor, and with the help of the wall, made his way to the other door. This, at least, would preserve what progress had been made. When he reached his destination, the barrier slid away into the wall, revealing the next troop of Brutes. Mã¼n smiled at them.

"Mess with the best, die like the rest." He flipped the front Brute a deceptively latent object the recipient could not readily identify, and touched the panel on the wall to seal the door shut. He heard the patter of plasma fire on the other side after it closed and the Brutes had recovered their wits. Following shortly came the telltale thump of the bomb he had handed the lead Brute. Leaning on the freshly sealed door, Mã¼n turned to see how Zimivee was faring. He found himself turning around in time to witness the youth's final kill- a double-puncture of the single-bladed swords through the last of the Jiralhanae. It burbled weirdly, grabbing at the Elite that had just killed it, before slumping to the floor from whence it would never rise.

Zimivee saw it to the floor, then heaved a breath and looked back at Mã¼n. The door slid closed, and the lights down the center blinked red; it had auto sealed as soon as it was clear of obstruction. Zimivee cast it a look, then leaned on it and slid to the floor, where he raised the swords and deactivated them. Mã¼n frowned at what he saw, not understanding. Zimivee rested his head on the door, and his hands on the floor, before closing his eyes and relaxing.

Mã¼n's expression turned interested when he realized his next perception was false- for a moment in the settling silence of the ruins of the ship's Command Deck, it looked for all the world as though Zimivee had just died, with Mã¼n watching. When Mã¼n moved to verify this, Zimivee moved, tilting his head to see the Elite approaching. After he had closed the gap, Mã¼n dropped to a crouch and plucked one of his swords from Zimivee's hand. "These," he stated, "are mine, and you may not borrow them." After he finished

speaking he took the other one, but directly following this he sat beside him.

"I thought I was in your way." Zimivee mentioned, his tone turning MÃ¼n's head. He was poking fun at the other Elite. "Why did I have to save your carcass twice in a row?"

MÃ¼n snarled at him, but in truth he too was amused- if only slightly. The kid had a point. "Remember it was you who was rescued from dire straits first, so that you might return the favor later on."

Zimivee smiled at the air in front of him. "You threatened me."

"You jeopardized my mission." MÃ¼n replied.

"I completed your mission, old man. You weren't doing anything at all."

MÃ¼n elbowed him, eliciting a grunt. "You know nothing of the Mirratord or their ways. I had my methods."

"What methods? You weren't doing anything at all!" Zimivee groaned, wrapping his arm around the accosted side. "â€|what are the Mirratord?"

"I'm not at liberty to disclose that. Not to you." MÃ¼n looked at one of his swords. "And you are not at liberty to disclose it either."

"You've mentioned this mysterious faction three times now, MÃ¼n. Can't I at least know what on the Rings you're talking about?" Zimivee asked. He spared a look at the sword being inspected, and pointed at it. "That's mine- I'd appreciate having it back."

MÃ¼n was about to respond when it occurred to him that his first impression might be incorrect; so instead of his almost instinctual retort, he asked speculatively, "The bloody handprint?"

Zimivee nodded, inhaling audibly. "Yes."

MÃ¼n burst into peals of laughter.

## 6. Sacred Ember

**\*\*Chapter Six, part one:\*\***

**\*\*0744 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

The wet smear on the wall lined up with the one on the floor, but it wasn't overtly evident where the donor of the blood from which it was made had gone. The three Jiralhanae standing in observance of the scene each had their own ideas, but one thing was blatantly obvious above all the rest; there had been Sangheili aboard their vessel, and more specifically, on their Command Deck.

One might go so far as to claim one of the petulant reptiles had been the one to kill Throug, but the details of that demise were to be seen; for one thing, the number of bodies scattered around the ruined

and useless room topped two dozen, lesser and greater clan members indiscriminately. It seemed aside from Throug, there had been no specific few on the command chain that was wanted dead. For a moment the trio contemplated trying to sniff the assassin out, but it seemed odd that any such destruction could have been performed by any one Elite; in essence, they were reluctant to admit to themselves the truth, as though no Brute could be found that had a sense of honor, but many were available who owned a good deal of pride.

It didn't take long for them to decide the ship had to be crawling with filthy Sangheili too cowardly to show their faces, each and all invisible as had been revealed by the spotty reports from the ones who were killed immediately after. From a crew of nearly thirty thousand of intermixed Jiralhanae, Kig-yar and Yanime'e, they were now down by more than two hundred. Sangheili or not, something was certainly killing them, and in a hurry. But it seemed as if the place in particular was cursed somehow; as the other two watched, the middle standing Jiralhanae suddenly spat a mouthful of blood, and doubled up on the floor at his companion's feet. Their alarm came too late to save themselves, though, both feeling the bite of an energy blade slicing through their thick hides prior to any evasive action either could have enacted.

"You could have laughed at them first." A disembodied voice grumbled. "Alsoâ€¦ what did I tell you about those swords?"

A second similarly disembodied voice responded. "You said I couldn't borrow them, not that I couldn't steal them."

There came a weary sigh.

"You moved too slow for my tastes, and you would have done the same anyway." Zimivee protested. "Do you feel ambulatory?"

"Yesâ€¦"

"Here- hey, hold still, how can I give these back if you make me miss by moving? You're hard to see."

Mã¼n laughed, taking the pair of deactivated swords. "I was actually starting to move towards the door, when you did that. I half expected you to want to keep them."

Zimivee made a petulant noise as he moved past. "You're hopeless."

Mã¼n began to follow. "I am interested to know where you got your hands on that re-gen pack, though. Those are only found in large medical facilities." He cast a glance at the pile of reeking bodies they had just made and were leaving behind. "It's also an experimental substance."

"I know." Zimivee remarked. "I stole it from the med-chamber on deck five."

"Deck-? You found it onboard this vessel?" Mã¼n asked. "I already looked through that deck and all I saw was a couple of Kig-yar on guard duty."

Zimivee cast the older warrior a look, before shaking his head and stepping to the control panel. When he had the door open, he passed through, ignoring the fact that had he wanted out he could have just gone through the hole in the other door the Jiralhanae had made coming in. MÃ¼n didn't speak, simply following his companion's apparent lead. He could go any direction he desired at any time, and he knew it, but for now the path Zimivee chose seemed appealing enough. "That might be because you weren't looking where they would keep something like that."

"I hope this limp doesn't persist long. I can't seem to keep a straight trajectory." MÃ¼n mentioned absently. "I also hope you know what you're doing, because you royally ruined everything I had in place."

Zimivee felt compelled to laugh. "Are you lost?" So far he'd done nothing but what his instincts had forced him through. And each time he got into some trouble he just kept saying the same things to himself- '\_You idiot!\_' was among the tirade. Of late he had never been more amazed by the sheer stupidity of his ideas and actions. MÃ¼n didn't seem to be much in the way of helpful, though he did have his moments.

"Not so much as lost but cast from my element." MÃ¼n replied. "What are your plans now? You've demolished the primary control room."

"Meaning?" Zimivee asked, glancing down a hall as he passed it, heading up to one of the hundred or so circular junctions dominated in the middle by a single column, usually filled with plasma conduits. MÃ¼n cast a look behind them.

"Meaning you have no way to steer this thing if the Brutes decided to roll her about and start shooting at your beloved station." He looked fore again in time to draw up short with the realization that Zimivee had stopped, and was facing him. Unlike the younger Elite, MÃ¼n could easily tell the position and manner of a cloaked fellow. Zimivee had to guess.

"Meaning you think I just murdered all my fellow warriors."

MÃ¼n stepped back, a little shocked. "Not necessarilyâ€¦"

"Meaning you think I've been nothing helpful the entire time I've been aboard?" Zimivee asked. "What do you mean by that, MÃ¼n? I know fully that no one can control the ship from that chamber anymore, that is not the issue here. I need to know where your true loyalties lie- and I don't expect them to be with me, so don't even try to go there. To tell you the truth I honestly don't care one way or the other about your silly little clan or whatever it is- this 'Mirrator'd'. You are here, you say, for the express reason of eliminating the majority of the Brute's resources- namely, their leaders. But every time I turn around, I find myself at odds with you, and I can never really figure out why. Who are you, MÃ¼n? Who are you really?"

MÃ¼n stammered for a moment, caught entirely off guard by this sudden barrage. He didn't get to do much beyond that, though.

"Nevermind, you probably wouldn't tell me anyway." Zimivee dismissed,

turning away in disgust.

Offended, MÃ¼n Gazenee reacted without thinking about it for the first time since he'd completed training years ago. Snapping an arm out, he seized the younger Elite by the back of his head, spun him around and knocked him to the floor- but he didn't leave him there, lifting him again with a turning kick that was powerful enough to have lifted a Brute, causing the lighter creature to smack into the ceiling- and when he was halfway down from that, MÃ¼n topped it all off with a viper-strike punch straight to Zimivee's middle. Without delay the accosted warrior flew across the hall and slammed hard into the adjacent wall, but unlike most of his kind and severely unlike what MÃ¼n expected, the kid neither balled up nor touched the floor with more than his hooves.

Falling onto them in a frighteningly calculated way, Zimivee coiled and launched straight back at his assailant, his bright black eyes burning with his pent-up irritation and all the pain he had suffered at the various hands of the enemy. MÃ¼n tried to evade the lunge, but was too slow, if by a margin. Zimivee caught him anyway, and from there it only got worse, as far as the fight went. MÃ¼n felt he had just gotten way in over his head as he was forced to battle off the angered youth who seemed to him to be living up to and more all his worst fears. A single semi-positive thought did occur to him, though, as he threaded aside a strike aimed at his face and sidestepped what could have been a paralyzing blow.

This kid should have been one of the Mirratord.

MÃ¼n imagined all his speed and skill melting in comparison with his sudden opponent, and he found himself berating his instinctual reaction the whole time. Zimivee was quick, every motion smooth and calculated to do a fair bit of damage if it managed to hit home, though few of them actually did- for that matter, MÃ¼n's own counter strikes never seemed to even come close to their targets, though once or twice he did feel a connection. Usually while he was thus in contact, Zimivee was too, sparing no time trying to block a strike that had already hit but using MÃ¼n's strikes like openings in his defenses- which, technically, they were.

MÃ¼n found himself wishing he had the impeccable skill and power of the top echelons, but though he was among the better few, he was nowhere near that level of which was required to even pretend to compete with them. MÃ¼n managed to keep a hold he'd gotten on one of Zimivee's wrists, and tried to use the opportunity to slam a fist into his ribs, but the younger Elite merely turned as though in dance and caused the Mirratord agent to miss. The spin also loosened and lost MÃ¼n's grip on his arm, freeing him for whatever move he chose next.

MÃ¼n stared hard at the young Elite before him, realizing something other than the obvious had caused him to back off. His stare was returned, he saw, but no words were spoken as they each regained their breath from the sudden conflict that had seemingly ended the way it began- abruptly.

MÃ¼n's senses reeled as he suddenly became aware that his flank held more than mere corridor; had a Brute found them? Careful to keep an eye on Zimivee, MÃ¼n spared some attention in that direction, to verify. Thankfully, the lone Jiralhanae walking the floor towards

them seemed oblivious, and for some reason didn't even pause to notice any smell that hinted of Sangheili presence. MÃ¼n sniffed reproachfully; had they really been here that long? Had they really been smeared by enough Brute-juice to lose their own scent in favor of the enemy?

When the Brute got past MÃ¼n, he touched his belt, only to stare down at it in horror when his hand found naught where one of his swords used to be- should have been. In a stab of panic, he checked the location of the other, only to nearly collapse in relief to find he at least still had that one. Taking it in hand, he turned to take both the Brute and Zimivee into account, but that was all he had time for before he witnessed the unfortunate beast's demise. The head rolled down its back as the body fell forward, the sharp, piercing glow of MÃ¼n's missing sword telling him he needn't worry about having to go looking for it.

Still, this made Zimivee no less of a problem himself. With the Brute's remains between them, MÃ¼n and Zimivee were left to stare uncontested at one another again. MÃ¼n took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself, but Zimivee hadn't deactivated that blade yet and it was making him wonder if the other Elite had a second target in mind.

"You never cease to amaze me, Zimivee." MÃ¼n grouched. "How do you always manage to filch my things without my ever noticing?"

Zimivee seemed disinclined to talk to him right then, but he answered anyway. "You expect to be able to notice when things are taken when you're trading blows? I did not attack you, MÃ¼n. I never wanted to fight you. But I am growing less and less appreciative of your continued presence here. If you cross me again, I'll kill you."

Somehow that warning seemedâ€¦ desperate. Something didn't quite fit, but it didn't make sense. Zimivee had come across as and then proven that he was as deadly or worse so than MÃ¼n himself. By looks, the kid couldn't be much older than MÃ¼n's own son, who was still in training at the Academy on his planet of birth. Yet, even still, he was beginning to show signs of distress, meaning his patience was wearing thin or his courage was, one.

How could that fit? Zimivee was a highly-trained weapon, probably someone's pet assassin, reporting directly to some high ranking official. But that seemed slightly unlikely, as any Prophet would have told his minions to watch for the members of the Mirrator- and it was an obvious frustration of Zimivee's that MÃ¼n had failed to elaborate on what he was talking about after the first accidental slip of tongue. He was lucky, and he knew it, but if Zimivee got to talking to any of his constituents, he was easily liable to find someone that knew a little more than he did- namely, all the odd off-hand myths, but it was a far sight more than Zimivee knew, and he would likely tell whoever it was he worked for. MÃ¼n was tempted to power up his remaining sword and dispose of the growing problem at once, but something stopped him- a curiosity.

Who was Hoku Zimivee?

**\*\*Chapter Six, part two:\*\***

\*\*0800 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_

"In an hour, what have we accomplished?"

"\_If you want to pick things apart, Leader, personally I am willing to take a break from all this never-ending work."\_ The slight hiss following 'Pohamee's voice made it clear what he was doing-extracurricular activity. More than a dozen Elites had suited up for this, their semi-covert operation to get those doors open again, preferably without an insane cost in lives.

'Lygotee could only smile. "I am certain most of us share that sentiment, 'Pohamee. It has been a long and grueling fight." 'Lygotee said. Carefully, he maneuvered his EV jet-pack's nozzles, so he coasted easily through the vacuum of space within the Station's shield envelope. Getting across the outer hull wasn't hard, nor would getting there intact be much worse. The main item was the 'bottleneck' at the airlock they would face upon attempting reentry to the Station's decks. Hopefully, 'Lygotee mused, there wouldn't be any more treacherous double-play this time.

The memory of the circumstances surrounding the death of his longtime friend and team member haunted him still, and teased the edges of his conscious mind even as the airlock door came into view.

\_This is for you, 'Obauleeâ€| and this time, pray we do not fail.\_ The thought seemed to echo in his mind, but they made it to the sealed door and then successfully got it open without incident. It seemed the corridor on the other side of the airlock was empty, and silence followed the team inside. Since the chamber inside the airlock was of insufficient size to accommodate them all at once, they passed through in clusters, dispersing into the halls as they activated their camouflage. Being caught without backup was a very daunting prospect, but what had 'Lygotee worried was that he didn't know half his mission-assigned team, and had no idea who was best at what or who needed to be whereâ€| or if any of them would even accept his orders.

It was his command, but that was saying little, considering there were only two in the whole assembly he knew he could trust completely. And not just to follow his orders, but to think up new ones to fit the ever-changing situation. They were a team, unbreakableâ€|

Shaking off his concerns in favor of concentrating on the situation, 'Lygotee stepped out into the hall with an Elite at his elbow that he had only spoken briefly to once before- he only vaguely recalled the warrior's name, and had no ideas as to what he was useful for. Belatedly aware he had lingered too long in a spot, 'Lygotee moved deeper inside the Station, needing to know their location and which direction the door they were supposed to open was. Airlocks didn't appear in convenient places, so they had had to use the 'nearest' one, which was painfully distant from where they needed to be. This meant not only that getting to the door would be difficult at best, but that if they were cut off from said door, or were unable to get it open at all, returning to the airlock would be worse than coming from it.

'Lygotee was not looking forward to this mission. He flinched visibly when he felt a hand find his shoulder, but a glance at the face in



his peripheral earned him a measure of reassurance. 'Lavuree had never let him down, even at his own expense.

The same could not be said of 'Pohamee, though his loyalty had never been called into question. He merely hadn't the knack of always being in the right spot at the right time to do anything about it when his Commander was in dire straits. That was 'Lavuree's talent. 'Lygotee appreciated them both immensely and equally, aware fully he would have been dead long ago so many times over were it not for the both of themâ€¦ the memory of his recently culled team member sliced through his mind like an energy sword, reclaiming his confidence and stripping it from him again.

'Lavuree's expression told him he hadn't done so covertly, however, as he knew that look; it meant his feelings were written on his face. Taking a deep breath to clear his head, 'Lygotee moved forward. Without even noticing, he left the pain and the memory behind quickly enough, in the swirl of calculating and formulating stratagems for the expected conflict when the Jiralhanae discovered their half of the fortress had been breached.

Cloaked and quiet, the Elites all moved forward, 'Lavuree at point. He had the map of the place pretty much memorized- if 'Lygotee had been leading, he knew without any trace of a doubt he would have gotten them all lost beyond hope of retrieval. It was another reason he had doubts about the success of the mission- he hadn't had time to become familiar with the skills and talents of his new, enlarged team, and he feared to deploy them badly when it counted. He could only hope they had enough sense to arrange their own selves accordingly so everything might not go wrong after all.

Avin Szã™nãqee, currently ahead of 'Lygotee, seemed to be moving in accordance with the things he could see. And though this was not a terribly bad thing, it did mean he was less than Spec Ops material, and this was not what 'Lygotee was used to working with. He sighed and shook his head tiredly as he surveyed the motions of his mission squad. They were strong, but they were ill-prepared for this task. If he could have more of the kind of Elite like 'Lavureeâ€¦

Szã™nãqee turned a far corner, and the whole group froze when he did. Quietly they all parted as a stream of Jiralhanae filed down the hall, either heading somewhere important, or fearing to scout these halls alone or in pairs. Fully six of the armed hairy behemoths strode through, but 'Lygotee saw them as little more than six of the enemy he wouldn't need to deal with later; his sword powered on, and like a string of lights on a single wire the energy swords of those around him came to life each in succession- as if in anticipation of his triggering the chain reaction. Unable to see the wielders, but more than able to see the swords floating in the air, the Brutes turned from a more or less calm demeanor to utter revolt. Jiralhanae blood splashed upon the walls, slices and pieces of Brute hide slapping the floor in succinct moist splatters. 'Lygotee looked down at his sword, aware he hadn't had the chance to so much as lift it, and felt an odd smile on his face. He had killed them- it was fully his fault. But indirectlyâ€¦ and the knowledge gave him the oddest sense of power he'd never known before. At the touch of a button his enemy had been smote, and despite how the button of mention had been the trigger on an energy sword, there was nothing beyond that single action- activating it- that had been his, personally.

Shutting it off, he re-clipped it to his belt and stepped forward, believing for the first time that he could truly pull this off- and perhaps even come back alive. Behind him, 'Lavuree and 'Pohamee followed with the rest of the warriors in tow.

In silence and often single-file they trod down the hall, each aware infinitely of the slightest noise that anyone made. It became so that even the lightest whisper hurt to hear, as to 'Lygotee it seemed a bold shout. He could hear his own heartbeat, his breath, the slight rasp of his armor every time an elbow brushed a side or thighs touched. He felt he was so wired for the detection of compromising noise that should anything of actual normal volume occur, he would be rendered deaf by the overload of decibels.

'Lygotee cast a glance down a hall they had chosen to pass, but on a hunch sent three of their number to see what lay at the other end. Perhaps it was nothing, but he had learned long ago to follow his hunches, as more often than not they proved more than worth following up with investigational action. After seeing the dispatched trio off, he turned to reclaim his position in the remaining ranks, and backpedaled abruptly when he found himself face to face with 'Lavuree. Somehow he looked pensively annoyed, but over the years he had come to know there was never any enlightening explanation accompanying the expression- only dismissal of any query. Still, in this situation, 'Lygotee was inclined to ask.

Without allowing for any such action, 'Lavuree turned from him, and moved back into the flow of Elites, disappearing among them as one more camouflaged form indistinguishable at a distance from the rest. Frowning himself, 'Lygotee issued an irritated huff and stepped into the pace set by the group, well aware he needn't be left behind. Sometimes it just seemed as though the warrior could read his mindâ€¦

Ahead of the party, the hall reached a juncture, leading to three other locations. Each passage had a door through which they would need to pass, but after determining that there was nothing behind any of them, they filed through towards the destination. So far, so good. 'Lygotee reached the point and wondered if he ought to see what was down them all, but decided he hadn't the resources to rediscover every nook and cranny in this side of the station. Quietly he walked past them. It didn't take long before collectively the whole party lost their transparent dispositions, their active camouflage engines overheating in batches as big as would fit in the airlock from which they had all come. 'Lavuree was able to spot the two members of his original strike team almost immediately, one by his face as he watched his Commander approach and the other by the dent in the shield engines over the back of his armor vest. 'Pohamee tended to be slightly more identifiable by the various dents, dings and scratches on his armor, as per his habit of not allowing much to happen to it.

"Are we all here?" He asked, once he had closed the gap between himself and 'Lavuree.

"Yes, Leaderâ€¦ save the three you dispatched earlier to survey that other hall." 'Lavuree answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Verification, 'Lavuree. You know how I hate it when I am left behind."

"Then why are you standing still while your team moves on without you?"

'Lygotee blew a sigh. "I did not intend to remain here, 'Lavuree, do not think me so shallow. Is it not good practice to periodically check on one's warriors to determine if misfortune has befallen them?" Without waiting for an answer he moved past, making time to the front of the group to see how far they had come and whether or not they had arrived at the position where the Jiralhanae were holed up. Thusfar all the silence was beginning to gnaw at him, and he had to wonder if they weren't all just walking into one more huge trapâ€|

"Leader, stop!"

'Lavuree's alarmed cry filled the air between walls within the corridor, and echoed in 'Lygotee's mind as he watched in surprised horror as what could easily be his end coming to meet him. Time seemed to slow, and stop, if but for only the span of a breath, but within that breath an Elite that had not previously been there slammed hard into his shoulder, and slung him off to the side even as the warrior that had been beside him was cloven in half by the sharpened metal cudgel aimed for him. Impacting the wall, he felt his shoulder crunch, but the following wave of agony from the injury came rather slowly to his suddenly adrenalin-spiked system. Brutes sprang from places too small to have hidden an Unggoy, most of them acting as if they had been literally boxed into place, charging into the fray on all fours like enraged animals too long in the cage.

Seconds ticked by that felt more like minutes, but it seemed to only be that way to him; so far none of his warriors seemed to have recovered from the overwhelming attack. And that, he realized quickly, was just positively unacceptable.

'Lavuree flew sideways with the force of pull only a Brute could have mustered, but rather than being flung, he balled up on the end of the arm and seemed to slither up it to the Brute's neck, which soon after was rendered less a head to carry. 'Lygotee was forced to his hooves in a hurry to avoid being crushed beneath the falling behemoth, but once there he found his motion returned to him, enabling action both swift and decisive.

At the onset of Brute casualties, things appeared to improve, if marginally. The screams of rent Sangheili and bloodthirsty Jiralhanae being sated of their lust filled the space to capacity, raising a thunderous ruckus that began to slowly change its tune.

All at once 'Lavuree reappeared in 'Lygotee's peripheral, the warrior a brilliant red in color and super reflective; he had become completely drenched under an artery at some point, but the good news was it could not be his own or that of a fellow's, by the color it bore. Bright energy lanced sharply, tearing through whatever came in the way, and cutting a swath big enough to allow a semblance of recovery and retribution on the Elite's part. 'Lygotee smiled, sending his own first kill to the floor, feeling proud of his team however dysfunctional it might have been.

Brutes began to fill the gaps between Elites, dropping with the evening of the field. This was just a minor detourâ€| they had a door

to open.

**\*\*Chapter Six, part three:\*\***

**\*\*1000 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

The warnings were all there. It was as if someone was watching out for him, but they had to be no more substance than the ethereal; MÃ¼n was something just shy of a monster, in his book- but indispensable, which was a pain. If he had wanted to kill Hoku in the slightest, then Hoku would be dead- long ago.

Whoever, whatever, this Mirrator agency was, they had a collage of nasty assassins at their beckon. Zimivee wanted nothing to do with them or with MÃ¼n, anymore than he already had, but it was beginning to look as though somewhere, somehow, he had been bestowed with the worst of curses; his worst nightmare was his only ally, and disposing of it or the mere attempt to do such a thing would leave him so very trapped and bound to such a doom as he dared not look in the eyes. The situation was problematic, at bestâ€¦

Zimivee had entered the vessel well knowing he might not come back, but he had never envisioned it happening this way. There was just something to be said about dying in a fashion that wasn't visible ten miles out. The sight was going to drive him utterly mad, if it hadn't already, as he owned the knowledge that anything and everything he did could too easily wind up being moot to the ultimate outcome. He had met his match, in psychological warfare, and it hadn't even been the doing of his acknowledged enemies.

Not that any Jiralhanae could be credited for such elaborate schemingâ€¦ but that only made the situation that much worse. There was frustration, anger to the point of rage, even spiteâ€¦ but above and beyond the measure of each of these was the fear- that haunting, hollow cry echoing in the back of his mind, following each and every action, driving him to awesome feats up to and including being able to fight off MÃ¼nâ€¦ who he hadn't realized was so deadly up close until they had had their little spar. The realization had only served to increase that fear and multiply his ware of his surroundings.

Had he no true allies? Could he own no true friends? Must everyone be their own and owning of no allies, pledging fealty to other, outside, often alien sources? Zimivee had become so familiar with the feeling of being alone in a crowd that he had occasionally wondered if he could ever return to the station, if he got that opportunity. Slowly the beleaguered Elite moved past the sentry who was literally looking right through him. That door was the single door on the ship he hadn't passed, and he was seriously considering it, right then- just to see if MÃ¼n would follow.

His heightened senses detected the masked motions of something else before he might have otherwise, and he realized it had to be the other Elite; he'd been a fool to think the agent had let him out of his sight for even a small increment of time. If he was anything, he was annoyingly observant, even if he never inserted any opinion of the circumstances he was seeing. Zimivee paused, half wondering what the fellow would do. The answer to his question made itself apparent soon enough without the asking, though, as the reflection of bright, hot energy reflected on the widening eyes of the unfortunate Brute. It occurred to Zimivee that the short, strangled sounding bark the

creature got out was sloppy for the agent's style, as it was usually perfect silence that followed that blade, when it was in those hands. The one Zimivee had filched from him tended to leave a trail twice as gory and a song saluting his methods.

But then, he had learned not to use it the way MÃ¼n did, barring utter necessity, as that particular style always left himself as bloody and wounded as his enemy- he simply didn't have the know-how to hold a filament of hard energy aligned with his forearm.

When the Brute had settled on the floor, in a growing pool of sticky Jiralhanae blood, Zimivee turned the whole of his attention to the killer of the beast. His sword was still onâ€¦ in a frightened dodge for safety he powered up the one he had stolen, twisting partway through his maneuver to connect the swords and deflect an otherwise unstoppable blade. He heard MÃ¼n snarl at him, and understood the tone of the growl meant the agent was offering no quarter- he wanted his sword back, he wanted Zimivee out of his way, he was going to accomplish what he still could in lieu of Zimivee's actions, but he wasn't going to allow Zimivee the chance to screw it up for him this time. Or so it seemed to Zimivee.

Turning aside the blade got him punched, the impact to his head shattering his balance and slamming his battered body against the wall behind him. Something on the inside cracked, and he sagged to the floor, gasping though he gained no air for the attempt, and doubled up in enough pain besides to not care. The sword he had held rolled to a stop beside him, dropped and disregarded in favor of more pressing matters.

His senses reeling, Zimivee never really noticed when he passed out for lack of breath, the pain in his lungs never peaking the other agony that MÃ¼n had granted him. \_Somehow,\_ he thought, \_this just doesn't seem fairâ€¦\_ on a ship filled with the enemy, and I get to die at the hands of one of my ownâ€¦|\_

MÃ¼n Gazenee stood over the crumpled form of the one he had come to think of as his equal or better in battle, and the expression he wore was one of confusion. This lifted, though, when he came to a conclusion that seemed to match with the circumstances; Zimivee had dropped, but the action was hardly his fault. Aside that he was, after all, just a kid to the older agent, he had been going hard and fast for longer than even MÃ¼n could have managed, and under some pretty rough conditions. The buildup of agony had to have been his ultimate undoing, as he limped where MÃ¼n walked straight, strained where MÃ¼n had strength to spare. What MÃ¼n found impressive was that where MÃ¼n fell short, Zimivee took up all slack and pulled it painfully tight as well. When he wasn't wounded, he was a marvel. Just the fact that it had taken nearly three hundred Brutes to bring him to his knees, plus the intermittent fighting with MÃ¼n, was downright frightening. Awe- inspiring, evenâ€¦|

Raising his comm unit to where he could see it, MÃ¼n touched the activation control. Pylori HavwÃ©nee would be the one to answer, following the Jiralhanae battle cruiser at a safe distance in a guised vessel large enough only for a crew of six, tops- but Pylori was the only Elite aboard. He kept MÃ¼n on top of events outside his current mission, changes in plans and orders, and relayed his reports back to the Mirrator command staff. They had heard precisely and exactly one report concerning this kid, but they were about to hear

more.

"Go ahead, Raptor." Pylori answered.

"Have you been detected?" MÃ¼n asked.

"Not as yet. There is no indicator they know to look. What are circumstances there, brother? I have detected elevated alarm systems coming online all over that vessel for the past four hours."

"Yes, sadly, and I think I may have been wrong to employ the methods I had chosen for this missionâ€¦ things have changed greatly since we last spoke." Affixing the device to his helmet, MÃ¼n raked Zimivee's limp carcass from the floor even as it began to fade into view. He continued to speak as he walked away from the scene of their latest incident. "You recall the young warrior I mentioned last report?"

"I do. I ran a search on him, but I didn't find much. If it was ever there, it was erased better than anything I have ever seen. Anything pertaining to any special or secret operations training or missions is nonexistent."

"By the Ringsâ€¦ What sort of youth comes fresh from the Academies with abilities like this? He had me backed against the wall, and nothing I could do would change that."

"Where is he now, Raptor?"

MÃ¼n looked at his burden and wondered for the second time why he was bothering to help the kid- there was no chemistry, no common ground, between them. All relations were hostile as each looked to the other as the blame for all that went wrong in their own plans. Still, somehow, they always wound up saving one another at intervals, despite. It was like a sibling's rivalry. Never allied, never at war, but incapable of letting the other go and equally incapable of letting them stay.

"Raptor?" Pylori asked, again. "Are you there?"

MÃ¼n drew a deep breath and let it go slowly. "He's currently suffered massive impact trauma and is unconscious. I have him secured from hostile forces, for now."

Pylori seemed to give that some thought. "You realize he could be working for our enemies."

"If he is, we have bigger problems than this warrior here." MÃ¼n mused. "Because he forced a slip from me, without appearing to try, yet he has not so much as pretended to do similar, even though I have been trying to get something, some sort of clue, from him."

"What have you learned of him so far? What has he openly shared?"

"That if I continue to be detrimental to him, he will kill meâ€¦ that and his name. I think either he is used to the alias so much it comes out even when he means to say the real thing or it truly is his name."

"Raptor, he isn't a machine. There must be signs. How does he carry

himself?"

"That's the part I cannot seem to figure out." MÃ¼n answered. "One moment he's more assured of something than I could be if I trusted everything to go according to plan. The next he's as frightened as a small child and fighting more akin to a cornered animal than any trained warriorâ€¦ but it makes him unbeatable. You have seen me fight, Nightbird. You have seen my style, my methods. Zimivee disarmed me of that, and I didn't notice until he was pointing my own swords at me."

Pylori made a noise that made MÃ¼n think he was shaking his head in disbelief. "I have seen you, it is true, but until I see this youth as well, I shall never believe you, I fear."

"Nightbird." MÃ¼n accused. "That ought to be the \_last\_ thing you want to do. I recommend we follow one of two directions concerning this warrior."

Pylori grunted. "What be those, Raptor?"

"Concerning the secrecy of the Mirrator and the safety of the Hierarchs, we must either recruit him or kill him. He has instincts like no other I have seen, even if he minds them only under great stress."

"You should have killed him the moment you slipped your tongue, Raptor."

"He is the only thing keeping me alive, under these circumstances." MÃ¼n argued. "And I, him. For now he is useful, even if delusioned and reckless part of the time. When he proves himself of no further use, I will attend the problem of leaked intel. But not until then."

"Raptor, you know protocol!" Pylori snapped.

"I am the one in the middle of this mess, I will decide what happens and when! I need only answer for my methods after it is concluded." MÃ¼n replied, his tone even and cold. He was finished arguing. Nothing Pylori said would change his mind.

The other agent heaved a sigh. "Raptorâ€¦ I am going to have to tell the Leaders everything you just said. I am trying to persuade you not to make the biggest mistake of your life. Get rid of him, amend your mistake, and finish the mission so you can get out of there and back where you belong."

"Raptor out." MÃ¼n snapped, deactivating the comn unit before he became angry at his compatriot. Placing Zimivee inside a vacant crew quarter, MÃ¼n sealed the door and spent a moment in reflection as he studied hisâ€¦ captive? Companion? What was Zimivee, exactly, by definition? He hadn't professed any loyalty to much beyond the Covenant, which strictly speaking had already broken and left his loyalties moot. MÃ¼n shook his head, and heaved a sigh. Such complications in his plans usually meant he would invariably need to pull out and wait for things to calm down and forget about him before trying again. It had only happened twiceâ€¦ in eighty years, just twice.

But along came a spider, and here he was again, trapped between his own loyalties, the situation unique to all aspects that he could tell. Where did he come from? Who did he work for? Who was he? Why was he here? And how had he come this far without hearing about the myth circulating the Covenant that nearly anyone else would have known just as a matter of course? Surely he wasn't deaf. He certainly didn't act it.

"Who are you?" MÃ¼n asked, staring down at the still form before him. The words echoed inside his head, as the question he had asked before came back, posed again to the same creature, yet remaining still unanswered. Somehow, MÃ¼n got the feeling he would be asking that for some time to come.

## 7. Disaster's Strike

**\*\*Chapter Seven, part one:\*\***

**\*\*1030 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Rkwa 'Lavuree sidestepped the first Brute and around one of his comrades, feeling the heat from his camouflage engine. Soon it would be too hot and would auto shut-off and leave him exposed.

He had no intention of letting the enemy catch him because of that, though, and was already heading for a place that looked like ample cover. A shadowed alcove at the far reaches of the chamber, it wasn't the most ideal for springing from once any fighting started, but so far they had avoided any outright combat. That wasn't the issue, here, either- the mission was to get to the sector door and open it from the inside so it didn't weld itself shut, and \_then\_ resume the assault. So far so good, but 'Lavuree had a bad feeling about the last stretch of their walk- which was coming into view even as their team made it all solidly across the oxygen processing chamber without incident.

He watched in silence as four of the team strode quietly by right under the nose of a Brute who was raking a porous rock across the blade on the back of his grenade launcher. The noise hurt 'Lavuree's teeth, but he couldn't rightly expect much from issuing a complaint. Sometimes, the most annoying things were the ones he could do something about, but didn't dare.

'Lygotee moved somewhere out front of the group, catching his attention. Watching the transparent figure move past a crenellated wall filled with alcoves built of spaces between conduits made 'Lavuree wonder if half the motions he made were real. The way his figure was wavering due to the backdrop made it hard to tell. Once the last of the Sangheili were past and through, he began to move forward, himself. The feeling of danger followed his motion, increasing with each step, until he finally realized why.

There before him, the hapless Elite taking up the position fore of only 'Lavuree suffered a massive equipment malfunction and complete failure. First his camouflage engine finished overheating, but instead of auto-shutting off, it detonated like a hand grenade glued to his side. Doubling the problem that he was now completely visible, the warrior's responding cry of pain nearly rendered the noise of the actual detonation moot. Brutes all over the room turned to see the



source of the noise, in time to witness the Elite dropping to his knees. The engine had bitten a chunk out of the warrior's side, rending flesh and peeling up armor plating. Bright violet blood poured from the wound, but at the moment, blood-loss was the last thing he had to worry about.

'Lavuree knew in an instant they were too far spread, and the Brutes would be upon them all inside the minute, to tear the rest of them to pieces as they were discovered. Reaching outward with his mind, 'Lavuree seized the moment, and froze it. This was their only chance, but extended still, time was running out.

"Get to the door! Get it open \_now\_!"

He wasn't sure where the orders had come from, was less sure of who had issued them, but the Elites seemed to understand. As one they formed up, and dragging their fallen fellow, darted for the door that would lead to the corridor between sectors- and the sealed door they were here to open. Finally the last of them were in position, and a defensive parameter had been created around the outer door leading to the corridor where the rest were, busily prying the door's codes from the computer to get the thing to open. 'Lavuree felt the floor tremble, but he held on. The more time he could give them, the better off they would be.

But he couldn't hold forever. First one, then two, then more and more of the Brutes broke free of his grasp, most of them charging forward on all four limbs in a blind rage. No one fully understood the events they were seeing, even when the final Brute broke free and moved toward the Elites, their motions broken and stumbling. And in their midst, fading into view, a single Sangheili warrior. The air rippled and warped around him, even as he staggered forward, attempting to evade the Brute's crazed onslaught. Plasma fire spanned the gap, searing the hides of those currently turned away, though that little detail quickly changed.

'Lavuree was forced to dodge back again, away from safety, away from the line of Elites who had all come into view again with overheated camouflage engines. Luckily, no one else had suffered another detonation of something that was not really supposed to be explosive. His hearts pounding in his ears, his vision fuzzy around the edges, he felt assaulted by the uproar the Brutes were calling out, snarling, snapping and firing their own weapons. The front ranks had engaged the rest of the team, but he was still swimming in those unable to press through to do some shooting of their own. Just the noise was incredible, and the furor was helping his scattered mentality none at all.

Complications surged overhead with the introduction of plasma grenades, as though the first three or so would never get close enough to bother him, one landed almost in his hands. Reeling away from it, clawing at the Brutes in an attempt to get clear, 'Lavuree came face to face with one wearing a set of scored and dented armor plates under his bandoliers.

Staggering back under the concussion of the last grenade blasting off, 'Lavuree had no time to evade the swipe the Brute made at him. Claws hidden by hair became evident when Doaedemet scooped his fingers under the Elite's armored vest and lifted him from his hooves. Snarling into 'Lavuree's face, the Brute clamped his other

hand around the Sangheili's skinny neck, intending to either rip it in two or snap the bones inside it. 'Lavuree's eyes narrowed at him, both of his own hands wrapped around the wrist of the hand around his neck. Telekinetic energy lanced through the Brute Commander, doubling him over shy of his intended action. Tumbling free, 'Lavuree tripped up a couple of other Brutes by accident, then another by design to keep it from hammering him into the floor when he turned up at it's feet.

Where Doaedemet wound up, 'Lavuree never saw, but he couldn't spare time to think about it when the Elites behind the firing line launched a second volley of grenades. The smell of burning hair singed his nose, but aside from the occasional buzz his shields got, 'Lavuree knew he couldn't rightly complain- they were, after all, only protecting their own selves. He knew he would have been shooting just as they were, were he in their position and another in his. But somehow, he needed to get through the mess and behind that line- somehow, gain a safer position where he didn't have as many at his fore as at his flank.

Feeling nauseous and weakened by the expenditure of raw energies, 'Lavuree staggered away from the line of Elites, hoping to gain a distance from the fighting so he might not be gunned down with the enemy. After several frustrating and harrowing minutes, he finally broke the crowd and pelted across the open floor for the other side of the room. He knew before he looked he hadn't gone there alone, and only a swift step to the side saved him from being crushed under the flying monolith that was the Brute who had chosen to chase him down. 'Lavuree took his carbine in hand and shot the presumptuous beast in the eye with a single round, at point blank, when it spun about following his evasion.

Freed of immediate danger, 'Lavuree took a moment to gather his wits and his breath, steady himself and reaffirm his footing. That accomplished, he raised the carbine to take aim at the back of the seething mass of tossing Brutes. Now there were grenades being exchanged, not just given, but the battle between the two lines at the fore of each group remained the worst part of the equation. Sparing a glance at the ammo counter on the back of the magazine set into the top of the gun, he looked back to the crowd of brutes and selected his first target. He fired, the target moved in a lightning-fast twitch, and the shot missed, embedding in another Brute's leg instead.

Not surprisingly, it did little beyond stop there- 'Lavuree doubted the beast had even noticed. After expending the magazine plug, and never hitting a single spot he'd aimed for, 'Lavuree had grown tired of the game and reloaded to fire fast and hard in a random pattern that was only aimed remotely at the writhing mass of angry Brutes.

Just his luck, and he hit one somehow in the head with three consecutive rounds, killing it and with its carcass felling another who was in the way. Shoving the dead weight aside, the second Brute rose again, but it also noticed there was a lone Elite standing on the wrong side of the crowd, and quickly rallied several of its pack-mates to attack with it. 'Lavuree fired at them until the magazine ran dry, and as the plug auto-ejected, he let the weapon rest at his side as he leapt to a nearby conduit cable on the wall. There was no way he could accomplish much by running back the way he

had come, but up was as good a direction as any. Brute hands slapped at the conduits beneath his hooves as he gained a height enough to evade them for the time being, but another that had hung back threw a major kink in the plan he had made by hitting him with a well-aimed grenade out of its launcher.

The shock of explosion robbed 'Lavuree of his grip on the conduits, but he wasn't going to let them have him that easily, especially when his shielding was only half gone and he bore no injury. Perhaps they would sing of him for thisâ€ twisting mid-air, he effected a backflip, and as he turned to face first away from and then back at the conduit cables, he fired a round of plasma from his rifle at the grenade-launcher-toting Brute, then a series of them at the conduits.

What happened was not what he had envisioned, but danger warnings lit up like Christmas in his mind barely a second before the whole wall erupted in a ball of brightly lit plasma fury. \_Oh, lovelyâ€\_ 'Lavuree thought, directly before he smacked hard into the floor atop the shooter Brute, and then rolling from it in time for the both of them to be bathed in searing, burning plasma from the burst conduits. More than he thought was proper to have fit in them came out, gushing in a pressurized spray before settling for a more tranquil flow from the open pipes. Dissolving Brutes' cries of utter and complete agony without comparison drowned out the nearby firefight, and as a result caused it to hesitate as both sides wondered what in creation had caused the few creatures to scream so. 'Lavuree had just crawled behind a column when the first observer turned to see, so none looking surmised his involvement.

Tearing and ripping at his armor, the Elite fought hard to be rid of it and escape its proximity at the same time not touch it while the plasma ate the metal as if it were paper and glue. Rid of the suit, 'Lavuree had escaped major injury, and a horrible death, as well, but he had not been completely unscathed by the incident. Leaning against the column to catch his breath all over again, the Sangheili warrior could feel the heat from the cooling plasma even at his current distance from it, and wondered if he might suffer some temperature-related malady.

The thought escaped his forebrain when the first wisp of the fumes reached him. Reeling back with his hand over his mouth, 'Lavuree pushed himself to his hooves despite the wear and pain to escape the awful smell and the likely hazardous properties of the plasmatic fumes. Coughing and wheezing, 'Lavuree was wishing he could have retained his armor- it had extracurricular enabling equipment attached to it, meaning an independent air supply. As he was, one of the Unggoy would have been better off than he, even with its little feet in the middle of that pool. Silence echoed through the bay for a moment, until someone realized the obvious aloud;

"The quarter has been poisoned!" A Brute cried, raising general alarm and telling the Elites behind them to don their masks again- but shortly after doing so they also resumed shooting, regaining the Jiralhanae's attention and reinitializing the fight. The wounded and fallen Sangheili had been pulled to the back, into the corridor where 'Lygotee was, at the far end attempting to open the quadrant door. It didn't take long for the Brutes unable to access the actual fight to begin to suffer, choking on the toxins introduced into the air by the cooling plasma that had created its own unique lake in the middle of

the floor- doubtless the ceiling of the lower level had bowed down, decreasing the height of any corridors and perhaps even dripping molten metals onto the floor there- as it were, liquid metal ringed the pool of plasma, which as it lost its own heated liquid state, became gaseous and was introduced into the atmosphere inside the room- if anyone opened a door, it would leak all over the station.

As much as 'Lavuree was content to allow the Brutes to gag to death on airborne toxins, his own people were at risk as soon as the quadrant door was opened- not to mention all other species aboard. First power would drop all over the station, due to energy-source loss, aka the plasma, then the toxins would travel, maybe get all the way to Hydroponics, and due to the loss of operations power, the air scrubbers would not be able to keep up, and all those plants would die, meaning the air would further toxify due to a sudden loss of good air production. The entire station would become a death trap, to anyone not constrained to canned air fed through a mask.

Those were hard to sleep in. 'Lavuree was exhausted, physically and mentally, but he couldn't allow something of such magnitude to occur- especially since it was his fault for shooting a hole in the conduits and letting that plasma out in the first place. There was only one thing he could think of to stop it in its tracks, though.

Explosive decompression- the stations automatic subroutines would slam shut and seal all of the doors and all the gasses would go harmlessly out into space, where nobody needed to breathe anyway. Pulling to his hooves once more, 'Lavuree tethered his armorless body to a second column, ensuring he would not follow those gasses out. Any of his comrades would fare better out there, considering how they each and all had armor, shields and EV packs as well as an air supply. If 'Lavuree went, he would die.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his mind, and felt the structure of the metal barrier between himself and the outside. He only needed a small hole to get things started, but he knew he would not be able to stop it from making itself bigger within the explosive decompressing. Latching onto the molecules making up the metal of the hull, the Elite began to rearrange them. A sudden spike of elation warned him to hurry; it was his commanding officer, having realized how close he was to accomplishing the mission. Once that door opened, the odds of someone standing in it in time to be crushed in half when it auto-resealed again were high.

Slowly, the metal rolled and rippled, but he let go the instant it began to bulge. All by itself the hull ballooned out and burst, the concussion blast of the first level disgorging its contents into vacuum causing the next wall in to rupture, exiting a chain reaction until the pull reached the chamber where the danger resided. 'Lavuree watched as the wall opened like an enormous toothy maw with a dark abyss beyond the teeth, before his tether pulled tight and everything in the room surged for that opening- including all the Brutes, Elites and loose clutter. Taking his queue, 'Lavuree formed a 'kinetic wall behind him, to stop the pressure of losing the one wall to cause the loss of the next one up. He couldn't hold it forever, but he knew he didn't need to. Once the pressure was gone, the gaping wound would hang open and still without further calamity to the vacuum until something else erupting got it started again.

When all the air was gone, anything that hadn't been sucked out began to level off and float in a deceptively serene manner, until the outward flow receded and the internal artificial gravity reclaimed its lost possessions. Staring bleary-eyed out into the broad, open empty of space, 'Lavuree began to see lit flares, as the Elites regathered themselves and headed back into the station through their exit. Doubtless none had expected that- but he hadn't had time or method by which to warn them, and there was nothing he could have done about it. He waited in the still, holding to his tether, holding his breath, and tapping his toes lightly on the floor as the vacuum and artificial gravity both teased at his mass and weight, until the last that he could sense had passed the outer hull. Reaching again with his mind, as a grand finale, he pulled on the metal and closed the ragged hole once more.

"\_How fast can you get out of your armor, 'Lavuree?"\_ 'Pohamee's words echoed in his head as he smiled at the rushing air through the vents in the wall beside him. He was all alone in the room, now, all that was left of the assault to regain access to this part of the station.

"Five seconds." He whispered, hoarse and sore from inhaling noxious fumes. "Just five!" He sagged to the floor against his tether, the gravity and air reclaiming the environment even as he faded from it, dropping into a haze enveloped by the darkness of unconsciousness.

**\*\*Chapter Seven, part two:\*\***

**\*\*1100 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

"What a mess you have made, Commander." Dial commented. "How did this happen? Did their vessel open fire?"

'Lygotee, somewhat at a loss, could only shrug. "I do not know how this hole opened here, sir. But every deck between here and hull-side were vented and emptied of personnel. Thankfully they were all Jiralhanae, but the damage is extensive enough the frame was bent."

Dial shook his head. Turning from the ruined wall and the mass of crushed-closed plasma conduits, he surveyed the rest of the chamber he was in. Everything that had not been secured to the wall or floor was gone, sucked out into space- including over three hundred Jiralhanae, and every bloodstain on the floor had drag marks going towards the hole in the wall. The opposite wall, however, where any further damage might have been found, wasn't even bowed. "There was no attack from the Jiralhanae ship!" He decided.

"Leader?" 'Lygotee asked.

"What closed the hole, Commander? And why are all the openings torn in an outward direction? And what," he added, striding to the indicated unscathed wall. "happened to the round within this chamber that it did not so much as leave soot on the other side of the room from the entry point?"

"You mean to ask what was in this room that wanted out?" 'Lygotee asked.

"Yes." Dial turned to see him, glancing at the divot big enough to bury forty Brutes in that was in the floor, empty and hardened in weird smooth shapes formed from the cooled slagged metal. "What wanted out, what happened, that it went slowly enough for the plasma to burn a hole in the floor before everything was sucked out into vacuum?"

"I can testify that it was much faster than that, Leader- and the walls each burst from the hull inward- I believe it was one of my Elites that shot the conduits open, which was prior to the incident." 'Lygotee answered, folding his hands behind him. "Whatever it was, it came \_in\_, not out."

Dial grunted. "I somehow fail to match that event to this evidenceâ€|" He frowned at the ragged holes still in the walls all the way to the outer hull, which he could see from his present location. "But the noiseâ€| we all heard the roar of decompression, all over the station. You made me wonder if she weren't going to rend apart and leave us all in vacuum."

"As far as I am able to tell, the event was isolated, and the holes never got any bigger than they are now- we all were sucked out through them, as were the Brutes."

"You failed your mission, Commander."

'Lygotee inclined his head. "I cannot be held accountable for this, Leader, and you know it. As resourceful as I am I do not hold the fabric of space at my behest, nor would I have employed it had I. No one saw this coming, and no one, not even the Brutes, were prepared for it when it happened."

"I heard reports of the Brute Commander being here prior to the explosions, but now I have confirmed reports of his presence elsewhere. Mind explaining that one, Commander?"

'Lygotee shook his head. "I cannot- personally the only time I saw him he and I were within the docking-bay." Sparing a look down into the divot in the floor, he added, "However I might bear mention of some rather anomalous occurrences happening in and around our fights with the Brutesâ€| it still evades me why they did not immediately fall upon us while we were strung out, when Dasakumee's camouflage exploded."

"That was part of the list of questions I was pondering, myself, Commander. It seems out of character for the Brutes to pass up easy prey in favor of one that poses a challenge." Dial picked a claw across the rippled metal on a column beside him. The pattern was fascinating, but the column had been damaged. When the repairs were effected, the pattern would be gone.

'Lygotee looked at the trail of droplet-shaped divots leading from the edge of the plasma pool to a heap of what looked like it had once been a suit of armor, melted into and welded to the floor. He knew who's it was, but he couldn't let his thoughts turn to 'Lavuree when bigger things were at stake- not to mention the Supreme Commander wouldn't appreciate having to bring him around from a daydream.

"Something was holding them back." He mused.

"What?" Dial asked, looking up from the column at 'Lygotee.

He looked back. "They were being held. I could see them, at first, and they were all acting like they were pulling against strong tethers binding them to the walls behind them. Some broke free faster than others, but there was nothing I could detect that looked remotely like cables or chains. Nothing at all- but I strongly believe they were not acting."

Dial narrowed his eyes at the Commander. "Something? Just, something? Brutes are hard to hold with real, genuine tethers, Commander. I seriously doubt an imaginary one would do better."

'Lygotee frowned back, but did his best not to allow the superior officer to see it. "I relate only what I saw, sir."

"And it means little as for facts, Commander. I am still waiting for you to explain it." Dial replied.

'Lygotee shook his head. "I do not own any explanations. I still cannot figure out who is responsible for the walls breaking apart- the Brutes are ruthless, but they aren't suicidal. And we had no access to that area once the fighting started, nor had any of us ownership of a weapon capable of punching through that many layers of hardened metal. I couldn't begin to guess, sir. "

"Among those you deposited in the medical ward for repairs, I noted one did not come in with his armor." Dial mused, changing subjects temporarily. "Does this mess here explain why?" He gestured at the armor welded to the floor.

'Lygotee nodded. "'Lavuree was drenched in the loosened plasma."

"And what was he doing that he wasn't sucked out the hole when it opened, an event that would have sealed his fate?"

'Lygotee was about to reply when he realized he didn't know. 'Pohamee had picked the wayward team member up, and hadn't said if he had found him unconscious or what his position was. 'Lygotee hadn't spoken with 'Pohamee since seeing him carry the half-cooked Sangheili out, either. He straightened. "I do not know."

"You don't?" Dial asked, sounding surprised. "Why? You didn't ask him?"

'Lygotee had a ready reply to that, at least. "He left this room in 'Pohamee's arms, sir, and he was unconscious."

Dial spent a moment thinking, staring at the jagged seam across the inner side of the hull down the torn and gaping wound through the inside of the station. Something wasn't adding up, but he knew ahead of time he didn't have enough pieces of the puzzle to determine what. "This event merits investigation. Did you know, Commander, that had not this hole opened when it did, when the door they sealed shut was opened the whole station would have become unlivable?"

'Lygotee pondered that. "I hadn't given it thought until now, sir."

Dial squared his gaze on his subordinate. "It is too lucky, too coincidental, and far too lacking in reasons why it would happen in the first place."

'Lygotee sighed. "Events of similar weal have been following me almost my whole career, Leader, and I have yet to learn why."

Dial breathed a frustrated sigh, and turned from the scene. "This will be addressed later. For now, there are still Brutes to deal with."

'Lygotee watched him leave, then surveyed the wreck one more time before following. "The gods only know why these things happen to me." Turning his back on the scene, the Elite strode to the door and through, aiming for the chamber where he had last seen 'Pohamee. If 'Lavuree had woken long enough to say anything, he would be the one that knew what. In truth he was more worried about the next action the Brutes would take, following this anomalous event, than what butchery the Supreme Commander might employ upon 'Lygotee's honor.

The mission, per se, had failed. There was no question to that. But it hadn't exactly been a total loss, either, and for it there was little room to complain. Even the Supreme Commander understood that much, if it made him unsure how to react to it. And though things had not, even slightly, gone according to plan, they had gone, at the very least, much better towards the health of all concerned.

'Lygotee was a corridor from the medical facilities when he encountered 'Pohamee, but he came up short when he saw his teammate's expression. The Elite was not overly expressive, via facial or bodily posture, but when he did strike some pose or crease his face it had a general meaning of importance about it. 'Pohamee didn't frown lightly. Nor, 'Lygotee knew, did he allow any passing observer to know he was worried about something. And even an Unggoy would have known to wonder after seeing 'Pohamee's face.

"Ah, Leader. You have spoken with the Supreme Commander, haven't you?" He asked, his tone muted and his volume low. This was one of his tells- when 'Pohamee got quiet, circumstances were far from ideal.

"I was, yesâ€¦ whatâ€¦" He started to ask, but found his voice cutting off without prompting when 'Pohamee waved at the air in a dismissive manner.

"You don't want to know that, Commander. When you know, you will learn it from the source, and I suggest you wait until you are ready for the worst day of your existence to face that source."

"'Lavuree is dead, isn't he?" 'Lygotee asked, his own voice falling in volume and measure. Somehow the news seemed surreal, coming from himself. But 'Pohamee hadn't said that. He hadn't said anything. He looked drawn, upon closer examination, something hard to accomplish when it came to 'Pohamee. The Elite was often mistaken for a robot, when he refused shock, indecision and pressure. He shrugged off what sent others reeling.



Just as he found himself expecting, 'Pohamee shook his head, denying the accusation. "No, 'Lygotee, he is not dead. Worse."

Surprise and denial rippled through 'Lygotee's frame.  
\_"Worse?"\_

'Pohamee met his superior's gaze, latching onto it as if trying to give some kind of silent message. The feeling 'Lygotee got was something closer akin to a deafening scream for help. It didn't match the warrior from whence it came, though, and it confused his reception. "He's gone, they took him." 'Pohamee seemed to waver. "I should be dead, Leader, they massacred the rest, andâ€|"

So it was shock. Somehow, somewhere, something had finally broken through the resolute warrior's seeming unbreakable mental barriers, and he had witnessed something to defy the laws of normalcy. 'Lygotee grabbed him. "Who took him? Where?"

'Pohamee grabbed ahold of the arm 'Lygotee had extended. "The Brutes."

**\*\*Chapter Seven, part three:\*\***

**\*\*1220 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

Hoku Zimivee opened one eye, the nictating membranes over both of them feeling oddly numb, as if he had pushed his face into some nerve gas. For what felt to be the longest time he thought what he was looking at was distorted by heat-waves, until he realized the truth of the matter. His eyes weren't focusing.

Panic gripped him when he realized much of his body wasn't responding to stimuli, leaving him mostly paralyzed on whatever surface it was that he lay. It hurt, though, it all hurt, and he wished he were in his quarters on the Radiant and not aboard some enemy vessel at the end of his ropes about to die some horrible death either at the hands of his counterpart, MÃ¼n, or those of a few dozen Brutes.

The shipboard population seemed willing enough to rip them both limb from limb, if they were ever slow enough to get caught. Zimivee rolled his head to one side, wanting to know if he were about to be killed or if he had managed to pass out in a place where nobody went, regularly. There was the distinctive sound of a Kig-yar arm shield activating, but he couldn't see much to define if it was on a Kig-yar or not.

Despite all his desire and need to get up, to move, he discovered any and all attempts were futile, so he relaxed his effort in order to try amending his blurred vision. At the sound of a door sighing open, he stilled himself to listen, hoping he might be missed. This proved not the case, when he heard a distinctive Jiralhanae snort followed by a guttural word that he never did catch. Something huge and a little fuzzier than all the other things loomed over him, and in that split second, all his nerves fired off and he coiled out of the way, rotated and came about in time to scissor down on the back of the Brute's neck. A stunned grunt escaped it, and it dropped onto its face, way off balance and open for attack.

Zimivee took a grenade from his belt and primed it, dropped it onto the Brute's back between its shoulder blades, and let it melt the

hair and meat there as it sank into a custom made divot fused in the muscles while he rested his hoof on the back of the squirming Brute's head. He backed off once it was securely stuck, a burning ball of HE melted into the anatomy of one who couldn't have deserved it more. The Brute, just as expected, went bawling backwards into the hall from which it had come, all the while clawing at its back in an effort to get the grenade out of its shoulders.

Three steps back into the hall, it detonated, and threw the Brute hard forward, against the partly closed door. Zimivee sagged to his knees, and slumped forward, uncaring of the half a Brute in front of him. He didn't want to die, but he knew he couldn't go on, not like he was. He was too tired, too hurt, and too far from help. His brothers might not even know he was alive at the moment, which made it harder still to cope. Nothing was easyâ€¦ but why did he always end up getting the short end of whatever stick happened along? For once he wanted a break.

The next time the door opened, in its cycling attempt to allow the blockage to pass and close at the same time, the body was jerked back, out of the track, and dropped in the hall. Zimivee wanted to know who had performed said act, but he hadn't even the strength to lift his head anymore. The adrenalin was gone, the moment was over, and he was through.

A hand cupped under his jaw, and lifted his head for him. Above him, standing just his side of the door, which now slid completely closed, was MÃ¼n Gazenee. Over his shoulder was a carbine, with plugs of loaded magazines on his belt. On each hip was a red-sheathed plasma rifle, and the two single-bladed swords snugly in their loops next to the grenades, opposite the carbine reloads. Zimivee wanted to say something, wanted to react somehow, but in the end his fatigue couldn't allow for it. MÃ¼n smiled at him, if faintly.

"You could be the best, someday." He was saying, softly. The words sounded liquid in Zimivee's ears. He wondered if he was going to pass out again, his mind swimming as the world began to tilt. "You could be so much more than you are nowâ€¦ at your age, I was half this good."

Zimivee rested the weight of his head against the supporting hand, sagging forward, no longer listening. He would hit the floor, if he wasn't held up, but he didn't care. He was far too tired to care.

MÃ¼n Gazenee lowered the worn youth to the floor so he wouldn't fall, and stepped back. Such strength- and stamina. It made sense, now. Whoever Hoku Zimivee had been before, he was stronger now, better attuned to the ways of the world, a deadlier weapon. But he was still just a child, so young and with so far to go. Truth be told Zimivee would have to be seen to and tested by the top echelons of the group, but there was no doubt in MÃ¼n's mind that the kid had as much if not more potential than MÃ¼n had had when he was recruited. It was rare to find ones like Zimivee. Outside the main sources, unrelated and unconnected in all ways but one, that one being the Covenantâ€¦ which was now dissolved.

Half-alive and wounded beyond repair, he had still felled an uninjured Brute and killed it to boot, without needing a gun to do so. Or maybe MÃ¼n was misjudging him again- half-alive was obvious,

but maybe he wasn't as beyond repair as one might think. MÃ¼n crouched next to the crumpled form of the youth who he had been keeping alive and who had kept him alive likewise, and began to wonder if he put in a word for him, if the Mirratord would accept him, or if he would even accept the Mirratord.

To the insiders, what was asked of the members seemed reasonable, but who knew what sacrifices an outsider might see it as. Finally in possession of the information he had been seeking, MÃ¼n had realized why his original impression had seemed wrong to him near the end, and where it had originated to begin with.

Growing up Zimivee had spent long hours of each day in practice, honing his reflexes to be the best for when he joined the Academy. When he became old enough to participate in the parade that the trainers chose from, he had been selected nearly right off. Despite being smallest in the class, there was no one he couldn't get the best of, and he shot through the lessons at superluminal speeds. Here was the warrior whose sire had made sure he would never fail when called upon, and would never falter under stress.

Too much stress, though, had gotten the best of him, and even though he obviously was in no way willing to quit even as yet, he still couldn't push on any farther. This daunting task had taken it all out of him, and he had no more. It would be days before Zimivee was fit for duty again. He was one thing MÃ¼n hadn't expected, though, aside from his apparent impressive skill- double jointed.

It explained why he was so much stronger- he had to be, else he would overextend and cause himself to come out of joint, leaving him helpless in pain on the floor- and why he was so much more flexible, able to do so much more in motion. He could escape any hold anyone had on him, regardless of where or who. And he could fling himself through the air like he belonged in flight, all aerodynamic and streamlined. But what he wasn't was someone's assassin-spy, nor did he hold any other loyalties apart from the Covenant he had joined. He wasn't specially trained to take on a monster of an enemy and win- he wasn't even trained specially. Zimivee wasn't anything especially extraordinary, but he \_was\_ scared half to death. And that made all the difference.

MÃ¼n spared their location a look, wondering what he could do to keep the Brutes from killing the singular fellow while he scouted out what they were doing in light of their loss of a central command station. The smart ones had scraped a couple of Engineers from the engine rooms to jury-rig a new one, but MÃ¼n knew he had time- if only a meager amount. The construction of said replacement command station would take time, especially since it was within the chamber where the old one had been- where all the contacts met. They wouldn't have anything like what they had had before until they put into drydock, but for the time being and the circumstantial allowances, things were looking more or less in a general upward direction. For now, the crew was leaving MÃ¼n alone.

Zimivee, on the other hand, had just been at the brunt of a scout/patrol, loners either out of the loop or sent sneaking out to see about routing the pain in their collective rear ends. It was still popular belief that their ship harbored more than a squadron of Elites, but how this reasoning could stand up to any sort of logic made it plain why Brutes were considered so lowly by the Elites; if a

goodly sized company of them existed aboard, the ship would have been emptied of Brutes by now. In light of their loss of coherent command, though, the Brutes were doing surprisingly well, and that worried MÃ¼n greatly. What did they know that he didn't?

He often wished he had had a squad of his fellow Mirratorid at his side, but his mission had been command removal, followed by a stealthy extraction. Truth in all MÃ¼n was supposed to have left long ago, not still be aboard a ship helping a lost and frightened youth trim the dwindling crew. But he had learned something, from that youth, in the time he had taken to change objectives. It had royally peeved his contact and extraction, Pylori HavwÃ©nee, but he had had more imposing characters become unhappy with him and he'd survivedâ€¦ he was not about to turn tail and abandon Zimivee after everything.

If brash and a bit annoying in his own right, the kid had opened MÃ¼n's eyes to something he had otherwise overlooked. And any revelation meant MÃ¼n had missed something, which usually was synonymous with 'fatal mistake', in MÃ¼n's line of work. He hadn't made a terrible many of those, or at least had been lucky enough to never have noticed. If he had to leave Zimivee behind for the good of all, it would most likely mean he was dead. Because of what MÃ¼n had witnessed, he was never more convinced of anything than he was about Zimivee being what was good for all- more than sure the Sangheili population on the station believed him dead, he continued to fight for them despite, determined to cripple the vessel when anyone else might have prioritized escaping it.

The fact made MÃ¼n feel honored to know him.

## 8. Extrasensory

**\*\*Chapter Eight, part one:\*\***

**\*\*0100 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

When 'Lavuree opened his eyes, he didn't understand his environment. First, the first thing he had seen upon opening them was a Brute, and beyond that anomaly, he was neither in the oxygen-processing chamber nor a medical ward. But then, the presence of the Brute could explain away both of those.

Perhaps he had been taken prisoner? The thought jolted the rest of him awake, and he tried to sit up, but found he had not only been tied up, but down as well. 'Lavuree was going nowhere. Relaxing back, the Elite tried to take in his surroundings, to see what he could of the circumstances. It was a small chamber, which made sense, without conduits or vents, and a single entrance and exit point, at which stood the Brute of mention. The scraggly beast was something of a marvel, when one got past the fact that he was, after all, a Brute, and not much else.

'Lavuree surmised he had to be enormously strong just to carry all the crud embedded in his hide that he did; and beyond that he carried not one but two RPGs, the first of which looking like it had been saved for virtue of the blade being in good condition- the rest of it certainly wasn't, though the other one looked operable. Grenades hung in rows on a set of crossed bandoliers over the Brute's shoulders,

completing the look. He was typical for his kind, 'Lavuree mused, but he had seen some combat. His upper lip was cleft, from the same cut that scarred his nose, and another scar had closed his left eye permanently. The beast looked surly indeed.

Looking himself over, 'Lavuree was mildly disappointed that he had no armor, and no equipment, but he had been expecting that much. All of his injuries had been seen to, which made him think he had been in a medical ward, at least for long enough to have been tended before the Brutes dropped by. His arms had been tied behind him, though, which complicated matters, especially when they were tied elbow to elbow. The position hurt, and caused his breath to be short, since he was stuck with his diaphragm half-pulled.

The Brute at the door cast him a disinterested glance, then raised a fist and banged twice on the door; surprisingly, it wrinkled and the noise echoed. Were they in the Maintenance Sector? 'Lavuree closed his eyes, and focused inward, until he found the calm necessary to reach out and see the outside of his confines. He found six Brutes in the hall outside, all guards, eight more at a control station down the corridor trying to hail their ship, and scattered patrols all over the rest of the area. So, he was in the heart of the infestation? How curious. And why was he taken alive, rather than killed? Brutes didn't usually employ the practice, but since they had, 'Lavuree wasn't going to complain. As bad as the situation got, he could always amend it, if at all possible, since he was still alive.

Finding none of his brothers-at-arms anywhere within reach, he began to despair, wondering if they thought him dead with whoever else had been in the medical ward with him when the Brutes came. There was no verification on that, though, so he steeled himself for whatever might come. Elation wrote itself on his features momentarily when he found and identified a lone Unggoy. The little creatures were infinitely useful, as far as 'Lavuree was concerned, but he had tactfully been keeping his mouth shut when a superior ordered them around like nothing more than cannon fodder. It wasn't his place.

The little creature responded speculatively at first, but then more enthusiastically, after 'Lavuree managed to convince him that the mission that had been planted in his mind would make the Elites he answered to very proud of him.

Plant a seed in fertile grounds, and watch it grow.

Unggoy rarely presented themselves to the Elites, preferring to hunker down and hope to be ignored or missed, and rarer still did they race past their fellow packmates in preference of the company of the bigger aliens. Unggoy he had known for years followed him with their puzzled expressions as Oahndeet pedaled past them without slowing down for so much as a greeting.

Truth be told the Grunt didn't know what he thought he was doing, either, but he bee-lined for the cluster of raving Elites anyway. They were speaking heatedly about a missing member of their own, but Oahndeet's grasp of the language ended there. The context was enough, though, for him to know he had found the right ones to deploy his information to.

It took him several tries just to get their attention, but he regretted it once he had it. The Elite in the red armor lifted him by his methane mask, and snarled in his face before tossing him away. He landed on his tank, though, which wasn't even dented when he came to a stop. Rolling back to his feet, Oahndeet frowned at the group, but quickly erased the expression when one of the ones in black looked at him.

"What did you want?" It sounded odd- which equaled dangerous- that the Elite's tone was so soft. Was Oahndeet fixing to be killed?

He stuttered for a moment before answering comprehensibly. "Meâ€| me have information on you lost warrior."

This announcement caused a stir in the ranks of the group. The black one spoke again. "How did you know about the lost warrior? What do you know?"

Oahndeet pondered that. "Me not know- me just come up with it. Me thought you would like to know, because me not think this from me own head- me not know any Elites by name."

"You thought it up- and we're supposed to take this at face value?" The red-clad scoffed. He was silenced by an upraised hand belonging to the black-clad.

"What name?"

"Ummâ€| 'Lavuree?"

The Elites exchanged glances. Looking back at the Unggoy, the black-clad asked, "And what do you know of him?"

Oahndeet shrank some, under the gazes of more Elites at once than he was used to. There were six or eight of them, all looking directly at him. "He okay. He locked in little room for Brutes to talk to. Ask questions. But he no have no armor, and he think he might be in trouble when talking all done."

"No doubt." As if in dismissal, the Elites all turned from him, and began their own converse anew. Oahndeet got the feeling they were wasting their timeâ€| and he dropped to his knuckles to skip back to the ranks of Unggoy for a secondary plan.

"You, you and you, you all with me. Me need little guns, no pack nothing big, we go crawling in the ducts. We have mission." He instructed.

"You only just come in from patrol, Oahndeet, and you talk to Leaders, and you back out again?" A Grunt complained. "Where the smart in that?"

"I be okay, just get up and come with." Oahndeet said, again. "Come on, up, up. We have long ways to go." When the three he had selected began to follow him, he started for the arms locker so they could grab needlers. Two braces of plasma pistols wouldn't be good for much against Brutes, but needles worked wonders when in sufficient supply. Oahndeet had learned this as a matter of course through the recent conflicts. Unless he took forty or more, pistols wouldn't be sufficient.

Once they were loaded, Oahndeet hopped onto the back of one of his fellows and pried into the cabinet where the spare shield generators were kept. While they were meant to be installed into the armor of an Elite following the original's failure, the devices could also be jury-rigged into a Grunt's armor if done properly. And the instructions in Oahndeet's mind kept stressing that the more defensive he had, the less offensive he would need to carry, and the smaller he could be- and smaller meant faster through the ducting. He carefully applied a generator to each of his mission-members, then masked them so the Brutes wouldn't see them and shoot them out first thing. A Grunt named Pan applied and concealed his, before all four of them moved out.

While stealth was imperative, it couldn't be maintained long enough to justify the extra weight and mass of a cloaking engine as well. The Unggoy would just need to be swift, and careful. Oahndeet set his Grunts in the right direction, and they all began to pelt along the corridors right through the wrecked room that had once been an oxygen processing chamber and down the gullet of the Brute's claimed sector.

Oahndeet was sure the Elites would kill them all for this even if the Brutes somehow missed them, but even as he had that thought the instructions surfaced in his mind again and he threw his fears in the back for later. He was an Unggoy- not a coward!

Where that thought came from would remain a mystery to him for the rest of his life, but his seeming nonchalance towards the approaching doom they were running for strengthened his companions, and not one of them faltered when the first Brute came into view. As one the group slid almost gracefully into a side passage, stayed there until the sentry had passed on, then shot out again and past the first wall.

Oahndeet steeled himself for a fight. He knew he only had three Grunts to work with, and no Elite backup at all, let alone a competent Elite Leader to make sense of the battlefield and give orders. But apart from this, he did have those three Grunts, after all, and each one was competent with their weaponry, fully healthy and well-armored, not to mention shielded as well. They might not stand for much in a one-on-one fight, but Oahndeet knew he and his team would persevere despite anything anyone threw at them for sheer force of will.

He would complete this mission, he was going to retrieve that lost Elite, and he was not going to let the Brutes hammer what information they could out of it! He was an Unggoy, not a coward. And that Unggoy was on a mission.

Pan pulled him up short when they came to a tee, when he almost passed it without looking into it first. Their luck held, when Pan's attention to that detail proved worth mention, and the three Brutes at the other end of the hall they were fixing to traverse turned and began to walk towards them, as of yet oblivious to their presence. Oahndeet made a fist and thumped Pan's armored shoulder, then waved said fist and pointed at the ceiling. The halls here were too long and too straight for a retreat to be effective; they would be at the other end of the hall when the Brutes reached the juncture, but they would still be in view, and likely in motion. Motion, as was common

knowledge, attracted the eye. Pan hopped onto his back, and Kip onto his, successfully reaching the vent overhead and opening it quietly. Taking hold the edge, Kip tapped Pan's tank, who tapped Oahndeet's, who then waved at the fourth member, the smallest Grunt named Wassal.

Wassal mounted his pack-brothers like a ladder, and scooted into the airshaft above them. From the bottom up they came, Oahndeet following Wassal, followed by Pan, who then helped Kip the rest of the way into the ducting he was holding onto. Once everyone was inside, hunkered down for the lack of available space, Kip placed the covering back over the hole, and peeked through it to watch as the disaster they had just averted strolled calmly by.

"Clear." He whispered, when he lost sight of the patrol, and in backwards formation they piled back out. The air ducting didn't run parallel with the hallways, making it a confusing substitute for a passageway to a predetermined location. Oahndeet kept at the knowing feeling that he didn't have time to be getting lost, and if he had to bop into the ceiling now and again, that was fine. He didn't want to fight the Brutes without Elite backup anyway.

The four Grunts moved quickly and quietly for their objective, avoiding alerting or engaging the Brutes they saw along the way—until at last there were too many of the bigger creatures to slip past in their old manner. The attention to size and weight paid off then, when all four of them were successfully able to traverse the innards of the air distribution shafts above the hallways. Oahndeet paused beside a smaller vent duct, and tried to look down it, wondering why he was so convinced that this was the one that led to the room where the captive Elite was. He looked over his ranks, then gestured at Wassal. Any speech would be echo-prone, and voices in the air system would certainly alert the Brutes.

The smaller Grunt made a face, but he waddled up to the vent shaft and poked his head down inside it. When the rest of him proved it would fit, too, and if he wriggled just so he could take his methane tank with him, he wriggled down through it to the vent on the wall inside the small room to peek through the mesh grilling at the occupants.

There was the Elite, without armor, but there was a Brute, too, which meant if Wassal made an entrance, he would need to have his needler at hand to fill the beast with shards of explosive crystal immediately after his feet touched the floor. Looking back at the Elite, he determined why it was just lying there, as though complacently; the Brutes had tied it down very securely, and without some kind of equipment, the Elite was going to go nowhere. Squirming backwards, Wassal returned to his packmates in the main duct, to which he tried to describe the situation, without saying a word. The Brutes outside would need to be gotten rid of, somehow, but luring them off would be easier than killing them all, as though they had the ammo for it, there wouldn't be much left for anyone else, as well as the fact that any dying screams would defeat the whole purpose when more came running.

Nods of agreement followed his message, and after giving him instruction to return to the small room and killing the Brute there, Oahndeet took the other two and retraced their steps enough to come out in the hall outside. Things would need to happen fast. Watching



them go, Wassal spared time to take a few deep breaths. Oahndeet had assigned this mission, but why the Elites hadn't wanted to come themselves still baffled him. He was just a Grunt, and a small one at that. Somewhere along the way his growth had stalled far short of where it ought to have.

Mustering the gall for the action, Wassal kicked out the grating and dropped into the room right under the nose of the Brute standing guard. If he lived through this, he promised himself he would never do it again.

**\*\*Chapter Eight, part two:\*\***

**\*\*0210 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

'Lavuree let go of the sights and sounds outside the realm where his eyes and ears might sense them, and pulled back into himself; it was fixing to begin, and he didn't need to be partly in a trance when the action started. Right as he looked up at the Brute, the smallest adult Unggoy 'Lavuree had ever seen slammed into the floor between them from out of the air ducting in the top of the wall to his left.

The Brute reeled back in surprise and shock at the sudden flash of motion, but before he could identify just what it was that had hit the floor before him, the little Grunt filled his face with razor-edged needles, and when they exploded, it left little of his face attached to his skull, and with the frontal lobes of his brain exposed and rent, the Brute toppled to the floor in a heap.

'Lavuree looked from the beast to the Unggoy, as it turned to look back. "You being rescued, Leader. You hold still and me cut you loose."

'Lavuree didn't answer- he didn't need to. He let the Unggoy slice through the cable wrapped around his arms, all the while wondering what had possessed the creature to come alone- surely he hadn't made it sound that urgent. The both of them would be dead meat before reaching the first juncture all alone as they were. But the Grunt didn't seem to care- as if he had an army outside the door waiting for them so they could move out, back the way they had come. 'Lavuree wished he had his armor, or at least some form of weaponry, but the only thing available was the Brute's RPG.

Dissatisfied with the selection but unwilling to leave the room unarmed, the Elite scooped it up on his way to the door. It opened with a quiet hiss to an empty hall. The picture didn't make any sense to him, having been certain there were supposed to be six or more Brutes there- but when the Unggoy ambled past his leg and started down the hall to the right, 'Lavuree had to let it go in favor of putting ground between himself and his enemy. He was lucky in that they had not had time to do any interrogating before his extraction arrived, but this was one good Grunt if he didn't even need to look where he was going to successfully steal a Sangheili from the enemy.

The situation began to make more sense when he saw another Grunt. Perhaps there were more of them, after all. The little creature darted for them, going full speed on all four of its stubby little limbs, but the Brute in pursuit, who was traveling in a similar

position, was gaining on it by leaps and bounds. 'Lavuree aimed the RPG at the ceiling and fired two successive shots, both of which ricocheted directly onto the charging Brute's head. Crude and clumsy as it was, the weapon did its job, stopping the Brute and sparing the Unggoy. Coming to a stop, and realizing what had just happened, the Grunt looked up at 'Lavuree and smiled brightly behind it's methane mask.

'Lavuree nodded to it, and moved forward. Two more Grunts turned up shortly, having had more success in losing their own pursuants in the maze of halls throughout the station. The four of them traded low-pitched squeals and grunts in apparent relief at finding one another in relatively good health, then they proceeded to go back the way they had come, navigating the halls to avoid as much combat as possible.

'Lavuree checked his launcher- it only had two more grenades in it, but it also had an impressive melee attachment if he ran out right when he needed to the least. By the third juncture, though, he began to sense alarm and fury stirring the Brute ranks, as they not only found their prisoner missing but the guard dead and one of the outer sentries down as well. Quietly he urged his escort to go faster- word was spreading quickly via the comn system, and soon everyone would be on the lookout for them.

Oahndeet had seen more impressive looking Elites, even without their armor. But something about this one made him respectful despite, even when no one would have really known if he had snubbed the creature and left it where he'd found it. The further along they got with the Elite in tow, though, the more Oahndeet found he rather liked the character, as most unlike the other Elites he had worked with, this one was being nice to them. Telling them they ought to go faster, should pick up the pace, and then said why. No plain, un-explanatory orders to perform such and such an action. And Kip had even said that he had saved his life, killing the Brute that had been about to catch him- and he hadn't tried to shoot past the Unggoy, rather calculating fast-changing angles and fired off rounds way over his head.

So the Elite either had a good eye or was brilliant with math. And he liked Grunts. Oahndeet began to wonder if he had been too late in rescuing the fellow, as no Elite in his right mind liked Gruntsâ€¦ he was probably doped out on some drug the Brutes had given him to make him more cooperative.

Still, it was a nice change, and he put forth the effort to make sure they got back to the Sangheili's territory intact before that drug wore off and his charge got irritable. They pelted along on all fours, running as fast as they could, the Elite maintaining their pace on his triple-jointed legs easily enough. Pan spotted the Brute patrol first, and called it to the attentions of the others, but the Jiralhanae quartet had only just popped from the cover of another juncture- and there was no stalling their momentum that fast.

Oahndeet tried anyway, having no desire whatsoever to barrel face-first into the Brutes, and to his surprise, he successfully attained a complete stop- and so did his pack-mates- several feet shy of the creatures. He felt like he had been grabbed from behind, and pulled backwards until he no longer owned any forward momentum. A

quick glance over his shoulder at the Elite behind them and he was convinced- but how had he grabbed four Grunts with only two hands? The question lost priority quickly when the Brutes began to shoot at them, exchanging hot plasma with sharp needles from the Grunts. First one, then another blew up in explosive gore as the needles tore them open, but the other two hid behind their unfortunate kin, even holding their lifeless forms up as a shield even after they had died.

Oahndeet screamed in protest when Pan flipped backwards, three consecutive shots to his head killing him and shoving him over. He hadn't seen the Grunt's shields die, but now that he looked he realized his own were nearly depleted. First one, then another grenade bounced off the wall behind the Brutes, showering them from the back with sharp flak. Both howled, and though not that badly hurt, both dropped their organic cover and for it were soon just as full of explosive crystal needles as their fallen comrades.

When the last needle detonated and the Brutes were all dead in rent heaps on the floor, Oahndeet turned to his fallen pack-brother. The Elite scooped Pan's body from the floor, and looked at it. Oahndeet wanted to protest, was half a mind to shoot the Elite full of needles too, but he held back, well aware the penalties for such an action. As one, Oahndeet, Kip and Wassal stared sadly at their pack-mate, unsure what to do.

'Lavuree shook his head, and set the Grunt down again. He had hoped the unfortunate creature was merely wounded, but the plasma had burned through his little face and eaten out part of his brain. He was dead, and there was nothing to be done about it. Watching the remaining Grunts, 'Lavuree noted that none of them so much as touched the body, but he had seen them all bristle with anger when he had picked it up. Grunts were like this; keeping their own culture a secret, even interacting differently when alone than when in the company of other members of the Covenant. And unless 'Lavuree suddenly ceased to exist, the Grunts before him wouldn't mourn their fellow in the way that had been passed down to them by their forefathers. 'Lavuree understood that.

But before he could say anything regarding circumstances or situations, the three of them turned their backs on the dead Grunt and proceeded down the hall. 'Lavuree spared a look at the abandoned body, the picture of Brutes feasting on Unggoy meat forming in his mind. Disgusted, 'Lavuree picked it up and followed his rescue.

The others might not understand, but the last thing 'Lavuree was going to do was allow the enemy even a single corpse to gloat over, let alone eat. As was expected, he earned a few odd looks from the other three Unggoy, but not one said a word, either querulous or in protest. 'Lavuree dismissed them, focusing on the task at hand. The patrols were thinner here, at the outer edge of the sector. It wouldn't be long before he was back among his own, and when he got there he knew the first thing he would do would be to don some armor. Being in a fight without it made him feel as though he were paper. His hide was certainly as resilient against rounds of plasma or grenade flak.

'Lavuree ran behind the three Unggoy, forming a spearhead in front of him. They were faster than he remembered Grunts being clocked as, but then the Unggoy had never been fully open or forthcoming with their

abilities. The one at the point of the spear suddenly bowled sideways, but before 'Lavuree could determine why, both his surviving comrades did the exact same thing- and right where they had been a heartbeat before stood a Brute, dual-wielding plasma rifles. 'Lavuree drew up short, dropping his load to one side to bring up the blade on the back of his filched RPG, but despite the alarming proximity he wasn't clubbed in reply.

The Unggoy began to howl in savage notes as they engaged more of the Jiralhanae, determined not to lose another of their number, but there were too many for one of them to mind what 'Lavuree had to handle. He felt the crude blade connect solidly with the Brute's shoulder, and it cut a nice deep gouge in the meat there. The problem was the placement of the wound meant the owner of the shoulder was now royally pissed off, rather than dead.

It fired plasma at 'Lavuree's exposed head, overheating both rifles at once. Alarmed and a little out of sorts, 'Lavuree did not have time to stop the flying plasma in entirety, nor had he time to duck out of the way. He was simply just too close. When the bright flare faded from his vision, he glared at the Brute, snapping his mandibles and snarling at it. If the beast wanted to play dirty, 'Lavuree would play dirty.

The Brute, to its discredit, stared in shock at the Elite for more than one reason- first, 'Lavuree should have been killed by the same virtue that felled Pan. There might even have been a hole out the back. But he wasn't even bleeding. He was, however, an altogether other color. Having been unable to stop the plasma from getting close enough to do damage, 'Lavuree's face and throat were deprived of the extra-cutaneous layer of skin. So stripped, he now looked very pale, the skin nearly white. As the Brute stared at the Elite in horrified fascination, the dark, hateful eyes seemed to droop, and drool out of their sockets. When 'Lavuree blinked, however, this also proved to be not the case, as the lenses were expelled from their previous resting place. Pale purple eyes burned through the brute, the irises the color of the Elite's blood.

'Lavuree snapped outward, the 'kinetic energies set loose upon the offending creature enough to rend the walls behind it and cause them to buckle- even as the Brute shattered like so much glass that had been hit. Those witness to the explosion turned and ran for their lives, having no wish to contend with a weapon the likes of which would do that to a formerly healthy adult Jiralhanae. But 'Lavuree wasn't done yet. He caught each of them, and with the enormous amount of fury he commanded, tore each of them to ribbons before allowing their remains to rest. When the last one was dead and mush, 'Lavuree turned glaring to the Unggoy, who were all cowering with their arms over their averted faces. They had never witnessed anything at all like what the Elite had just unleashed, and likely never would again.

Looking down at the three little Grunts, his temper began to cool. He was reminded of another of the same species, one he had known years before. He turned away, and paced back to where he had left Pan. Myri was dead. The unfortunate Unggoy had been dead for years- almost as many as 'Lavuree had known his team- 'Lygotee, 'Pohamee and 'Obaulee. But 'Lavuree could never forget him, and never wanted to. Myri had taught him something about the virtues of being a Grunt, and had been the one to show him that even those looked down upon by all others

could rise to an occasion.

Myri was responsible for 'Lavuree's viewpoint of the Grunts being more than mere cannon fodder. They were people, tooâ€|

Quietly, in the settling calm after the storm, 'Lavuree picked up the limp body of the little alien that had risked all to come get him. Turning to the other three, he pushed on them lightly until they recovered enough from the shock of seeing the Brutes rip to pieces without anything laying a hand on them to move on. Passing them one by one, all the ones that had tried to flee, 'Lavuree realized how well timed his outburst had been; counting the piles of mush on the floor as they went past them, he came to the sum total of fourteen.

Had they all gotten to shoot, had they all gotten to fight, there might not have been anything left at all of 'Lavuree or his escort.

**\*\*Chapter Eight, part three:\*\***

**\*\*0400 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

MÃ¼n Gazenee raised his head, groggy from his short nap, aware that some noise had awakened him- which was good, considering his location. He blinked the fuzz out of his vision quickly and took an assessment of his surroundings. Nothing seemed to be terribly out of place. Looking down, MÃ¼n spied his charge, and wondered if the kid would ever forgive him for all the things he had done, especially those that he had witnessed. Zimivee didn't strike him as much of one to hold a grudge, but he hadn't been overly forgiving of late either.

Seeing all was well, MÃ¼n let his head drop again, tired and worn and wanting the rest- even though he had already gotten a good couple of hours and some change to sleep. The Brutes had withdrawn, but he knew that the stalemate couldn't last. Still, he was hoping for more rest than he'd gotten as yet, after having been awake and active for more than a day. Fighting Jiralhanae wasn't exactly light work, but MÃ¼n had had worse- he just wasn't going to push himself that hard unless he absolutely had to.

Zimivee, on the other hand, hadn't likely missed a terrible lot of sleep, nor had he trained and prepared for such an occasion. MÃ¼n snapped awake and alert again, this time having gotten all the way to his hooves before stopping. Testing his senses, he found a rifle in his hand, and his other fist wrapped around the grip of a blade. Satisfied, he stepped lightly past Zimivee's prone form and up to the locked door. Carefully he touched the side of his head to the cold metal, listening for the noises he was now certain he had heard. Sure enough, there came another such noise, from the other side of the barrier.

His senses reeled when his presumably secure six suddenly created a noise of its own, causing him to jump and turn back, to stare hard at the seeming unchanged environment. Was he dreaming? Was this some sort of fatigue-induced delirium? For all he was able to tell, nothing had changed and all was well- but there was the undeniable presence of a phantom noisemaker. His gaze centered on Zimivee when he saw a small motion there.

He relaxed visibly when the other Elite shifted slightly, and opened one eye. The other opened after, and his expression pinched as he came to realize every single one of his aches and pains. MÃ¼n smiled, not for Zimivee but for sheer appreciation that he was not, in fact, going mad. Zimivee's gaze came to rest on MÃ¼n's knees, and lifted from there to his face. His expression turned worried. MÃ¼n didn't understand why until he realized what the situation must look like to the kid- there lay Zimivee, not immediately armed, and there stood MÃ¼n, weapon in hand and another in his grasp as backup. There stood MÃ¼n, over Zimivee, smiling down at him like some rabid beast.

He almost laughed, but the action would not have helped matters much, so he let go of his sword to offer Zimivee a hand off the floor. Oddly enough, he took it, settling to a relaxed, rocked-back pose once he was up. He committed some time to the study of the Mirrator'd agent, before speaking. "How long was I out?"

MÃ¼n nodded- a fair enough question, neither assuming nor accusing. "Little over seven hours. How do you feel?"

"Betterâ€|" Zimivee mused, speculatively. "What have I missed?" He didn't look that much better, now that MÃ¼n had a chance to see him in a semi-active pose. The way he was holding himself made the agent think most of his injuries still hurt like mad.

"Not that much. Things have gotten quiet since you dropped, but I think they may become interesting again once the Brutes awaken from their own naps."

"Should we grant them that time?" Zimivee asked. For the first time, MÃ¼n thought he heard a hint of respect in the youth's voice. It took him a while to conjure a response in light of the revelation.

"No, I think not." He mused, flipping the rifle over in his grasp one-handed, and extending it grip-first, if upside down, to Zimivee. He twisted his wrist over before accepting it, so that when he righted the set of his hand, he was holding it correctly without need for adjustment. MÃ¼n nodded, approving of the situation- Zimivee was ready to fight, even though he really had no business being anywhere but in a medical chamber. He understood the necessity of the actions within the next few hours, and that if they weren't correct to the situation, things could go royally wrong really fast.

MÃ¼n looked his companion over. "Can I trust that you are up to this task?"

Zimivee nodded. He understood what the agent was really asking- can I trust my back to you without it being stabbed? Fighting the Brutes was one thing, but fighting MÃ¼n was something he didn't want to do ever again. He was in no shape to pursue that conflict anyway, and he knew they both knew it. But he had come to realize something else, too- MÃ¼n could have killed him so many times over, had he the wont. But he hadn't, even after Zimivee's promise. That meant he wasn't going to, and he didn't want nor need the conflict between them, and was asking after its' dismissal.

Zimivee had to admit- if MÃ¼n was willing to see past it, then so was he. Neither one of them needed it right then, and both would be better off without it. Just so long as one didn't do something to

aggravate the other. MÃ¼n turned from him, then, and keyed the lock so the door would open. There was nothing in the hall, that Zimivee could see, but for some reason MÃ¼n was cautious as he peered out into it.

Apparently satisfied that the immediate area was clear, he signaled something bizarre at Zimivee with a hand and vanished within the cloaking folds of his active camouflage. Taking it at face value, Zimivee activated his own camouflage and followed the faint waver in the background out into the hall and down it, away from the room they had been hiding in as the door closed.

Zimivee felt every one of his injuries, acutely aware of each one and fearing what they might do to his mobility when it counted. For some odd reason, MÃ¼n led him through a seraph bay, in one side and out the other, through the corridors going mostly around the places they had formerly been frequenting. Figuring it was some method the agent was using to stay low, Zimivee didn't bother to try to question the route. When they arrived at their destination, he realized why. Brutes had gathered in clumps here, possibly what remained of the crew.

There were hundreds of them. Picking his way between them as they shifted amid one another, Zimivee came to a sudden stop when the distortion he was following- MÃ¼n- somehow went up the wall and across the ceiling to drop quietly back to the floor behind a rather solid wall of the ugly hirsute behemoths. Jaws agape and still standing on the other side of them all, Zimivee could only stare in wonder at how in creation the agent had done that. Up the wall, maybe. Zimivee had done that, if only on rare occasions. But across the ceiling? And without any grounding momentum? Zimivee saw him push roughly on the back of one's shoulder, before stepping away.

Just as it was intended, it caused a stir, and a guiltless Brute was blamed for pushing the one MÃ¼n had aggravated. Killing them might have been easier had there been only a few, but there were simply too many in the immediate area for that to be a practical endeavor. Between the shifting and arguing Brutes there appeared gaps, but they were too small for Zimivee to fit through. He waited and watched, patiently, untilâ€¦

Zimivee tensed, his focus on that growing gap. It was going to get smaller as soon as it got big enough, so he had only just enough time. Taking three steps back, he vaulted forward, jumped and tucked into a ball, to spread and slip right between the elbow and chest of one brute and the balled fist of the next. Coming lightly to a stop after a short roll across the floor, Zimivee let his momentum right his position so when he stopped, he was standing straight and firm with a slightly spread stance, right there next to MÃ¼n. He cast the agent a look, and was rewarded with what looked like a nod of approval.

Casting a glance back over his shoulder, Zimivee saw the Brutes shifting pause, and still, as first one then another began to pick up the scent of Sangheili blood. Obviously they were \_meant\_ to be a solid barrier- they had learned that a single sentry wasn't good enough to stop an invisible Elite, especially since Brutes were not renowned for their exceptional eyesight to begin with, and at the moment, all he and MÃ¼n were was a pair of slight distortions in whatever backdrop they were against.

Turning away, he followed MÃ¼n through the broken doors, one of the halves missing entirely from the track. This was the one the pair had broken before- the locked one at the far end of the room had been opened, and was closed at present but had a reasonable stream of traffic through it. Zimivee paused to take in the scene, noting the Engineers and the mess they had made. Kig-yar were all over the place, the vulture-like creatures posted like surveillance cameras, their eyesight superior to almost all other creatures within the Covenant. Zimivee was about to move after MÃ¼n, who somehow had slipped past unnoticed, when he caught one of the diminutive creatures looking directly at him. He held still, and hoping to be missed, covered the glow generated by the contacts at the fore end of his plasma rifle. Apparently satisfied by the image it saw, the Kig-yar looked away, allowing Zimivee to slip farther into the room, into one of the sunken partitions on either side of where the command platform used to be. There, he found MÃ¼n.

A wry smile touched his features when he realized this. This was where he had first met the agent, easily more than a day ago. He had lost track of the time, having had more pressing matters on his mind. MÃ¼n turned to him, looked either past or through him for a moment, then made another signal- for some reason Zimivee got the impression that this one meant he was supposed to stay put while wall-crawler did a little in-room recon. Content with that, Zimivee nodded his agreement, then watched as MÃ¼n hopped out of the deep end with barely a hand on the floor above him. Zimivee wished he was that limber. Engineers drifted past, disassembling the platform and reassembling it as it was reattached to the base. Zimivee watched as it went up, the holographic displays generated by the projectors in the ceiling rippling with static as contacts were patched and split, to run through the holograms set to appear around the platform once it was up.

Shortly, MÃ¼n dropped back into the hole again, and brought Zimivee's attention down from the roof of the cavernous chamber. There was another rather odd-looking gesture. Something wasâ€| wrong? Something was obviously bothering MÃ¼n, but Zimivee had no idea what the hand-signals were supposed to mean. The agent made to move, when an alarm was suddenly raised by one of the Kig-yar. MÃ¼n burst from the cover, rocketing for the exit, but Zimivee saw what awaited him there and he moved faster still- catching the agent and stopping him far short of the intended destination. MÃ¼n fought him off for a moment until he realized it was only Zimivee, but by then the motions had brought the attentions of the Brutes to the scene, and all the Kig-yar had activated their arm shields.

A volley of hot plasma lanced down at them, and though MÃ¼n thought himself finished, well aware he hadn't enough time to evade it, one more Kig-yar arm shield snapped on, and the plasma washed across the barrier over them instead. MÃ¼n stared hard at the arm it was buckled to, as more hostile fire arced in in the form of grenades. Where had Zimivee gotten one of those??

The younger Elite snagged him by the arm and yanked him to his hooves, before shoving him into a new vector. Seeing what lay ahead, MÃ¼n ran for it, Zimivee hot on his heels. As one the pair vaulted over the heads of the Brutes that were streaming into the chamber, landing together in the middle of the pack. Grabbing ahold of one another's hands, Zimivee darted up one wall and MÃ¼n went up the



other, their connecting grips providing just enough pressure to keep a semblance of their weights on the walls instead of towards the floor. Up and over the rest of the Brutes they went, arcing down and disconnecting once they had their hooves on the floor again. More Brutes appeared, but these were few enough that MÃ¼n drew out his single-bladed energy swords and engaged them with a starting twirl, ending in a hoof embedding in the last Brute's gut.

Zimivee slammed his elbow into its face when it hit the wall, dazing it long enough for MÃ¼n to toss him one of his swords to dispatch the beast while MÃ¼n fended off the Brutes that had turned around.

Seeing an exit point from the conflict, Zimivee lanced out, slicing the Brute crowding around the side of the one MÃ¼n was killing in half, then grabbed the agent and turned him about, away from the tumbling heap of Jiralhanae carcasses. MÃ¼n took back his sword, deactivated them both, and made for the clear corridor Zimivee had just showed him. MÃ¼n knew better than to try to take on the entirety of the remainder of the crew all at once, and any exit from this madness was a welcome sight.

Together they put ground between them and the enemy, but now that they had been spotted, a flock of Kig-yar and hoards of Jiralhanae swarmed after them, filling the corridor to capacity. MÃ¼n tried to lose them by splitting from Zimivee, but equal numbers went after each. He caught up with the younger Elite four halls later, deciding not to let himself nor his companion be cornered and killed because neither had any backup.

Zimivee burst out into the seraph bay, but though MÃ¼n thought to stall his momentum enough to turn and follow the veranda surrounding the bays for two levels, Zimivee had other ideas, and in a last ditch effort to stop the agent from making what he thought could become a fatal mistake, he snagged his claws under the older Elite's armored vest and sped up, verily carrying MÃ¼n as they sailed cleanly over open air and landed hard on the back of one of the seraphs- the fighter rocked in its anti-grav cradle, but no Brute or Jackal could clear that kind of jump, not without the kind of propelling speed only Zimivee seemed possessed of. MÃ¼n smacked bodily face-down on the hull, the wind knocked from him upon impact.

But unlike Zimivee, who somehow had choreographed his landing so he hit hooves first and had coiled into a crouch, MÃ¼n didn't rightly need his breath to keep moving- at least in a pinch, anyway. He knew here was a bad spot to stop, and he knew also he could always catch his breath later, if he lived that long. But their pursuing antagonists had been stopped, not by any barrier but by a significant lack of one, and he found himself in the ideal position to leave them cold in his dust.

Raking his claws across the hull, MÃ¼n jumped to his hooves and darted hard across the domed top of the fightercraft, attempting to jump to the next seraph over. He missed, if just by the slightest margin, but Zimivee sailed cleanly over his head before sliding to a stop on his side and reaching for the grip MÃ¼n had on the edge of the wing.

MÃ¼n scowled at his inadequate abilities, but as long as Zimivee was on his side- which was of questionable duration- he knew he wouldn't

need to be fully and completely up to par with those of the youth. As long as he could make it this far, Zimivee would pull him the rest of the way up. Once he had regained his footing again, MÃ¼n ran the length of the craft to the nose and leaped onto the balcony floor of the level beneath the one where they had left the Jiralhanae and Kig-yar. Zimivee wasn't far behind him, and together the two Elites made their way out of sight and out of range of the Brute's weaponry. For right now, some space between the combatants would do wonders as far as morale was concerned.

But MÃ¼n couldn't have been kicking himself harder- how could he not have \_seen\_ that glaringly obvious trap for what it was??!

## 9. Albanism Paradigm

**\*\*Chapter Nine, part one:\*\***

**\*\*0531 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

'Lygotee checked his carbine, and then the corner. Wherever that Grunt had gotten his intel, it was bloody good. Surveillance from the station had verified that 'Lavuree was alive. Now they were on their way to go and retrieve him, before the Brutes might attempt anything such as interrogation. Not that it would really do them that much good, but it would certainly ruin the Elite unfortunate enough to be the one being interrogated, and since it was 'Lavuree, 'Lygotee had never been more adamant about his retrieval. He owed his life to that warrior far too many times over to so lightly dismiss him when he in turn needed saving.

Strangely, the halls here seemed emptyâ€| something the Brutes wouldn't normally allow. They liked to know when company was coming, rather hated surprisesâ€| the thought stalled mid-way, and his brain locked up in utter confusion for a moment before his mandibles loosened and he let go a strangled, startled noise.

Coming down the hall was the most terrified looking Brute he had ever seen in his life, running like he had no more go left in him but still too scared to stop even so. Brutes didn't scare, nor panic, not like Unggoy. Yet this one was showing all the signs of a full-blown panic attack, and without a weapon at hand, either the red-code plasma rifles they favored or an RPG with a crude knife on the back, the beast was charging straight for the team of Elites- without slowing, even though they were for the most part in plain sight.

One side was too frightened to care, the other too shocked to realize, and the terrified Brute sailed past them and on down the hall, wheezing and gasping for air as he ran. 'Lygotee's head turned to follow the Brute, until it disappeared around the corner and was out of sight. He blinked, wondering if what he had just seen was real. Looking at his companions, he received a row of equally blank stares.

"What inâ€|?" He muttered, his face wrinkling in an effort to portray his confusion.

"Did you just see what I just saw, Leader?" 'Pohamee asked, disbelief in his voice.

'Lygotee shook himself. "Something happened- something must have, and we need not find out what lest we too go running after thatâ€| Brute." He looked down the hall, where it had come from, and frowned. "Caution, brothersâ€|"

"What happened to him?" Another Elite asked, coming back to his senses.

'Lygotee looked back at his recovering team. "I don't know- but considering, I don't think I want to find out." He said, shaking it off.

"Agreed." Two said, at once. The one to the left added, "Do we continue?"

"We must, if we are to find our lost brother. And I, for one, am not deterred from that mission by one frightened Jiralhanae."

The three members of his team all nodded in succession. 'Pohamee, 'DÃ¶thumee, and SzÃ¶nagee. Not his real team, barely what he was used to working withâ€| he felt a twinge of pain for the loss of 'Obaulee again, and had to weather it down once more before he turned to face the hall where the Brute had come from, and put one hoof in front of the other.

Once more they moved forward, scanning down adjacent corridors they passed, moving quietly and quickly, but saving their camouflage engine's batteries for when they had penetrated deep enough to need not be seen. The outer patrols they could engage and kill without incident, but just a strike team's worth engaging the heart of the Brute's territory was a dishonorable suicide attempt that had increasingly higher chances of being successful. They were to get 'Lavuree, look at the lay of the place, and get out. Once back behind their own lines, they could use the intel to damage the Jiralhanae's base of operations. But when they did, they would do it with far more warriors and far more firepower.

'Lygotee stopped short when he caught the unmistakable smell of blood- and not just a small stain on the floor, but lots of blood, and it was all fresh. He glanced at his team, but by their expressions he could tell they all smelled it, too. How many bizarre incidents would they come across in a day? Had the Brutes found something, maybe, brought something, with them? 'Lygotee looked ahead again, wondering what exactly he was stepping into when a pair of Grunts waddled around the far corner of the hall followed shortly by another, and then an Elite carrying a fourth, which looked dead.

Why the Elite would carry a dead Grunt was beyond him, but it only took a moment for him to realize he recognized that warrior- even without his armor. 'Lygotee straightened, elation writing itself across his features. "'Rkwa!" Quickly he sprinted the short distance between them, as the Grunts crowded around their hooves and 'Lavuree set the dead body down.

"What happened? What did they do to you? Do you know why you were taken?" 'Lygotee asked, verily all at once. "Are you injured?"

'Lavuree shook his head. "Aside from a few bruises, a light burnâ€| I am well, Leader."

'Lygotee peered curiously at his friend's face. "What in creation happened to your face?"

"I told you, 'Lygotee, I was burned." His tone was oddly formal.

He nodded, then, though he had never seen anyone turn a pasty grey because they had been burned. "Good that you are wellâ€¦ let us leave this foul place before we are overcome with the numbers of the enemy."

'Lygotee gestured at the Elites he had brought with him, but 'Pohamee stood still right where he was even after the other two had moved. 'Lygotee was about to tell him again when he realized what had the warrior glued. Looking back at 'Lavuree, he discovered he had missed what 'Pohamee had not. He paused.

"Your eyesâ€¦" 'Pohamee began. "You'reâ€¦?"

'Lavuree cocked his head. "I admit I have been wearing a face not my own, but follow my logic for a moment; if your skin was the color of white ivory, would you stand the idea of being the easiest thing to spot on the field?"

'Pohamee shook his head. "No. But weren't your eyes black, before?"

'Lygotee couldn't believe what he was hearing. For fifty years he had assumed 'Lavuree was just like all the rest- and come to find out he'd been hiding behind a mask of ink the whole time. "You are albino?"

'Lavuree inclined his head. "I was wearing lenses. I confess myself feeling slightly blind at current for their lackâ€¦ it is much too bright for anything to focusâ€¦"

'Lygotee's mandibles hung undeniably open. "Have I ever truly known you, friend?" He asked.

'Lavuree picked the Unggoy carcass up again, and started walking, getting the group moving by the act and forcing his superior to follow if he meant to hear any replies. "You know me, Leader- I am the same warrior that you have known all along, adaptive, cunning and resourceful as always."

'Lygotee wasn't so sure. "Is there anything else I don't know about you?"

'Lavuree just smiled.

**\*\*Chapter Nine, part two:\*\***

**\*\*0615 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant \*\*\_**

"You are back." The acknowledgement doubled as a greeting, if a muted one, spelling of small appreciations and no real personal gain. Dial didn't care about 'Lavuree so much as that he had not just lost one more of his warriors. The numbers of lost on both sides had reached a statistic in size, and he was not looking forward to adding to it at all even though eventually he must.

Blood could not be shed on only one side of this war. And as much as both might wish it so, neither were delusioned enough to think for a moment that one decisive and swift crushing blow would do the trick. Currently, Dial was more concerned about that ship hanging outside the shield well than any single warrior in his crew compliment.

He didn't really listen to the reply, turning away once he had seen the party enter the chamber whole and unscathed, the quarry as one of their number. He knew 'Lygotee would issue a full report in due time, and he could see to any details then- for right now, he had other things to attend, among the fact that he had no mounted or sheathed cannons in the \_Radiant\_'s skin. She wasn't built for war, nor was she constructed as a military outpost, and had never been retrofitted with weaponry, as the ships passing her docks regularly were seen as sufficient protection from whatever rogue vessel happed out that far. Trouble was, the only ship in the sector had made its status known as enemy, not defender, and no more of any other kind seemed forthcoming. Dial sighed, feeling a headache borne of frustration coming on.

'Lavuree watched the Supreme Commander depart, aware of the circumstances surrounding his expression but keeping his own opinions to himself. Dial wanted time in silence to try to think- 'Lavuree was content to let him have it. Looking away from the retreating warrior's back, he saw 'Lygotee's and 'Pohamee's faces, looking back. Each wanted to know how he had escaped, but he already knew they would never grant the Grunts any credit, even if he tactfully omitted the parts where he had been planting suggestions in their heads the whole time. While not simple-minded, Unggoy were a simple race, keeping their minds more clear and focused of common mental trash often found in abundant supply in the minds of his fellow Sangheili. They had been more open than his own people, for this reason, to the suggestion he'd given.

Simply put, Unggoy didn't worry about the honor of their forefathers each time they took a breath. Some Sangheili didn't, either, but then, some Sangheili had been banished from society for reasons beyond heresy to the Covenant. The Honor Code had it's own rules to follow, and though 'Lavuree did mind them, he often wondered why so much was left so open- much of the thought patterning around him was built upon implications wrought from interpretation. If he didn't deliberately tune them all out, the noise would be overwhelming- not to mention he would be feeling everything everyone within range was feeling, and the medical ward wasn't that far off.

'Lavuree had enough pain to deal with right now. He looked past his friends, the brothers-at-arms he had worked close beside for fifty years, and scanned the room. Back in armor, he was again comfortable amongst the others, willing to socialize without fear of being caught so exposed again when circumstances demanded he be armed. War was never kind to the unprepared, though he had to admit, many of his own seemed rather dangerous.

Rage flared somewhere to the right, turning his head to see. A cluster of Elites stood at a terminal, reading off the names behind the numbers of the dead. Apparently, someone in the medical chamber that had been raided a few hours before had had connections with those in this one. The crippling emotion was tempered by sorrow; bloodkin. 'Lavuree turned away as the Elite sagged into a seat, his

head on a hand. If there was somewhere else he could go, then that place was far preferable to this one.

Determinedly, 'Lavuree started for the door. Not unexpectedly, his teammates followed, carrying with them the as yet unanswered questions. Rkwa 'Lavuree knew neither had spoken, but he already knew what they would ask and which questions they thought more pressing than the others. He had some answers, but was rather disinclined to answer anything at present, even the queries of his own friends. They meant no harm, but at times even they were pressing.

Finally, he paused in a juncture between halls, and looked at the plasma conduits running the length of the pillar in the middle of the circular juncture. Sparkling, reflective flashes of white-hot plasma glinted through the proofing, the whole thing a source of warmth if one felt cold. Right then, though, 'Lavuree felt like he might swelter.

Drawing up beside him, 'Pohamee spoke first. "You have much to share, brother." He mentioned, casually. "The oxygen processing chamberâ€| the medical ward, your escapeâ€|"

"What, why, how?" 'Lygotee added. "I don't know where to start. You realize the Supreme Commander has asked to know these things, and I have no answers."

"I do not mean to burden you so." 'Lavuree said, quietly. "Rather I have taken pains to ensure you all remain well and able." He turned his gaze from the conduits to first 'Lygotee, then 'Pohamee. After a wash, mostly to remove the grit gained from the handling the Brutes had given him, the Elite hadn't bothered to reapply any ink and was at current not wearing any tinted lenses. His pale violet eyes shone like two perfectly cut and polished round amethysts, each set into an ivory casting. But it was all organic enough, flesh and blood and bone. 'Pohamee suspected he had paused where he had because the lighting here was dimmer. "As you must know." He added. "The loss of 'Obaulee near to crushed me- I could do nothing, at the exact moment when I wished nothing less than increased ability."

"What are you trying to say, Rkwa?" 'Lygotee asked, tentatively. Suddenly that nagging feeling that something wasn't adding up came back and gnawed at his insides. But this time it was closer akin to what it felt like when he was on the verge of something, and the mystery was about to be solved. If he could just reach that final clue, the puzzle would solve itself.

'Lavuree focused on him. 'Pohamee wasn't sure who to look at- both seemed to know something he did not- but he held his opinions and interjections at bay until he learned what that something was. "I am saying I have kept this from you for far too long. I am saying I could have saved him. I could have kept him alive."

"You? How? You were nearly killed by the same detonation." 'Pohamee objected. "None of us escaped that unscathed- you were pouring more blood than your ancestors owned."

'Lavuree just shook his head, sadly. "I am the same warrior you have always known, but in some ways I am more than I seem." He glanced at 'Pohamee. "You remember what you witnessed when they took me."

'Lygotee looked at 'Pohamee. Suddenly he was the one who was lost in the conversation, as 'Pohamee had never told him what it was that had sent him fleeing from the medical chamber in the ward where 'Lavuree had been taken for care. 'Pohamee nodded, soberly. Whatever had happened, it had not been pleasant. "I still do not know why they wanted you alive."

"I do." 'Lavuree responded. "You see, in the bay where the Jiralhanae had piled their arms and explosives, the leader of them took it upon himself to try his hand at killing 'Lygotee, here."

"I remember that." 'Lygotee said. "I can't really recall what stopped him, though."

"I did." 'Lavuree answered. "I stopped him, and it made him mad. So when he tried to kill me so he could finish you, I had more than I could have handled alone."

"What did you do?" 'Pohamee asked.

"I confused him. Destroyed his sense of direction, and in its place I put fear. It worked, and I won. But the armor he had on was something I'm not familiar with, and it protected him to an extent. He should have been killed. Any other one would have died, but after an hour he dragged himself from the floor and left the area. What scares me is no one saw him leave- only the evidence that he had gone." 'Lavuree said. "I can touch your mind, 'Pohamee. But there's more than that. When I'm angry when the agony of injury becomes too much to bear something else comes to life, and I become capable of touching your body, too. It's never pleasant even just to watch. Do you understand anything I am trying to say?"

"Touch my body? Okay, something tells me you don't mean with anything in relation to your hands." 'Pohamee began, speculatively. "I've witnessed this I seem to recall you saved many a mission from compromise by somehow making all the jumpy enemy calm again. Is that what you mean?"

'Lavuree nodded. "It is."

"I understand now," 'Lygotee exclaimed. "Everything that ever happened around me, that I could never explain it was you, wasn't it? You kept me alive, you're the one that made me sure it wasn't safe even when I couldn't have known, you were what pulled me back when I couldn't move you were doing it to all of us, weren't you?"

"Yes, Leader."

'Pohamee's eyes grew wide. "By the Rings. Is it?"

'Lavuree nearly laughed, suddenly, though it appeared without any outward prompting. "No, the talent has nothing to do with my physical complexion. Albinism is caused by pigment cells' lack of response to light my skin does not tan or darken when exposed to certain kinds of radiation, and as a result I had to stay away from the sunlight for lack of natural protection from it."

'Pohamee sputtered for a moment, the question stolen from his maw

before he could even speak it.

The revelation of this little fact made 'Lygotee laugh, though. "Caught you on your heels, didn't he, Thin?"

'Pohamee glared unappreciatively at his commanding officer. "Do not mock me, Leader, you would have done nothing different."

"I do not presume to mock anyone, 'Pohamee. You have earned your place, and bled for it like the rest of us. I do, however, find myself at a bit of a loss as to why our friend here has been attempting to hide a very useful attribute." His gaze turned to 'Lavuree. "Does this explain your escape from Brute custody?"

"I tried to reach you, Leader. You don't listen quite as well as you assume. That is why I had Unggoy with me. They listened, and came for me."

His expression turned to astonishment. "One of their number came to us and mentioned you. Are you sayingâ€|?"

'Lavuree merely nodded. "Why do you suppose everyone always seems so aggressive and over-reactive?"

"â€|what?"

"You're used to seeing me. I can't allow the kind of clutter you do and expect to own any kind of focus. I need my calm, Leader, it is imperative to my function." 'Lavuree looked at 'Pohamee. "I suppose my meddling is presumptuous of me, but you appreciate being kept alive, if on a razor's edge, do you not?"

'Pohamee, somewhat stripped of words at present, only nodded. He felt like his brain had locked down. It was nearly impossible to think of little 'Lavuree as the responsible party for all those odd occurrences. The Elite was really no bigger than the kid 'Lygotee had asked for reconnaissance from. Zimivee had struck 'Pohamee as small and skinny at first sight- and that first sight had reminded him when he'd sat next to 'Lavuree how small his own teammate was. 'Pohamee was the largest one of them, at an inch broader and taller than 'Lygotee, but when 'Obaulee had been alive, he and 'Lygotee had been nearly identical in height and breadth. 'Lavuree stood at six feet and ten inches, but looked as good in size as 'Pohamee in that he didn't own a lot of mass- 'Lavuree was skinny top to bottom. The memory of lifting his teammate over his head and throwing him onto an outcropping above them came back to him, then, the first time when the Elite's size had truly come in handy. 'Pohamee could not have lifted 'Lygotee, not like that.

"My constant influence on not just environments but suggestive pushing might have had something to do with your own personal lack of notice. You thought it was you, half the time, and so dismissed any of the rest of it as normal. Didn't you?"

'Lygotee nodded agreement. "I did, at that. Though I swear I thought it was me, with I guess a messed up magnetic field or something, attracting spatial anomalies. It never occurred to me that you were always there, for all of them, even when 'Pohamee and 'Obaulee weren't."



"I agree. But I have to ask- if he thinks it was him, why do I think it was him, too, and not me?" 'Pohamee asked, earning an irked look from 'Lygotee. His expression was of sarcastic gratitude.

'Lavuree cocked his head. "Because most of the time, you minded your own. 'Lygotee needed most of the help."

"Now see here!" 'Lygotee protested, feeling as though he was being labeled as inadequate for the job and incompetent as a warrior. The accusation seemed out of character for 'Lavuree, the one he had always assumed was the most loyal of the bunch. It was an infringement on his honor, though, and he was not about to stand for it, not even from 'Lavuree.

"I did not mean that asâ€¦|" 'Lavuree began, attempting to make amends, but he trailed off before he even got to the actual apology. His expression twisted.

Alarmed, 'Pohamee looked around hastily, and as a result of his reaction, 'Lygotee did the same. Both reached for their clipped plasma rifles. "What is it?" 'Lygotee asked.

'Lavuree looked at him for a moment, before something muted reached them from up the hall. "They're here." The words were so quiet he almost missed them, but at the introduction of that distant, muted noise, his hearing began to lean toward it, straining to hear it again to identify it. He turned his head again to look at his teammate in query, but at that point, 'Lavuree exploded into motion, flying down the hall at a dead run, plasma rifle in one hand and sword in the other, coming active in a flash of brilliant, hot sharp light. The reflective glow against his armor and skin combined made him look more akin to a vengeful specter than any living warrior.

Without question the other two followed, matching his pace and meeting his flanks with their own swords in their hands. Ahead, the shouts and cries above the din of battle echoed down the hall they were in. Something was about to die, and still others had already fallen, all for the infraction of escaping. Rage and blood-lust combined with agony and the steely calm of the ones with direction. Shutting them all out, 'Lavuree plowed face-first into the maelstrom of bodies, sword and rifle buried in his fists. Brutes were everywhere, but soon they would all be on the floor, repainting it in red.

'Lavuree would see to that.

**\*\*Chapter Nine, part three:\*\***

**\*\*0645 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Blood raced through the air in a brilliant arc. The spray came to rest across the armor of an Elite clad in black, splashing back for the recoil of impact. All motion seemed slow to his senses, but many were those who saw it all the same way. His sword sizzled and spat, searing and cauterizing wounds even as it made them, cutting limbs and heads and deep slices through chest cavities.

Something hard slammed into him from behind, shoving him forward hard and fast, throwing out his swordarm and loosing his grip on his

plasma rifle. The former connected with something, bit deep into it, and then came free as the warrior touched the slick floor. He heard the sharp crack of his armor on the hard surface, a sudden intrusive noise distracting him from the din of the fight; screams of pain, cries of rage, oaths exchanged by either side, the sounds of plasma slapping across shields and armor, walls and ceilings, the slapping of blood spraying across out from a vein onto some other surface. Had he been any more aware he might have heard it coagulating.

The fallen Elite dropped onto 'Lavuree slid sideways, twitching. He had been killed instantly by whatever had had him, but the weight had knocked the wind from 'Lavuree. The albino Sangheili twisted, desperate not to be crushed under someone's foot. He wasn't big enough to be saved by strength of mass alone, but even if all it was was another Elite stepping on him, it would leave him quite useless for some time- and that was the last thing he going to allow.

During his twist to be free of his dead fellow, 'Lavuree's sightline came around to view what he had cut when he was pressed down. The shock of realization froze the world, and he stared hard in disbelief until he realized his chest hurt- with the next inhalation of breath he shot to his hooves, clawing 'Lygotee from where he had landed. Static crawled across the warrior's skin as the shield sparkled to life, recharging from depletion. 'Lygotee gurgled something, sinking his own claws into 'Lavuree's arm.

Apart from the fighting at last, 'Lavuree laid his Commander out to see what damage had been done. Though unaimed and haphazard the blow would cause more trouble the longer it was left- which ultimately meant it was fatal. But the fact that the wound had been caused by 'Lavuree's own blade while it rested in his hand added insult to injury all the more- and there was nothing he could do about any of it. 'Lygotee looked up at him, his eyes glazed over long ago. Plasma scoring decorated his armor, sticky violet showing past the plasma burns. He would have survived those- could have even risen, continued to fight. Something had put him in exactly the wrong spot at exactly the wrong timeâ€¦

'Lavuree felt the buildup, an agonized need to lash out. Rage, shame and pain washed the hallway, overwhelming all sound and individual emotion. Brutes and Elites alike buckled under the enormous stress of pressure when the shockwave hit them, metal and flesh rending equally until the hallway itself bent, cracked and buckled inward, bulging in places and crushed inwards in others. 'Pohamee rolled from the floor before he knew what he was doing, but he knew why in the next instant. His fist connected with a Jiralhanae face, turning it up, and his sword came around at the exposed throat a heartbeat later. He turned into the next rising Brute, felling it with a stab into the lower back where the spine connected with the hip. It dropped, lame, but alive.

The next cut killed it, before a hairy hand clamped on his shoulder and dragged him back, arching over the pointed end of a Jiralhanae blade. It didn't immediately penetrate his armored carcass, but the sound it made grating across the metal he wore made his teeth ache as he twisted up and over, turning his body over the Brute's head. He brought his free hand down on the longer hairs on the crown of it's skull and his swordarm arced around as his bodyweight jerked the Brute's head back. The next Brute caught the severed head in the gut, sailing in hard and fast so it winded him.

'Lygotee blinked, dazed, able to taste his own blood in his mouth, but though the fight had begun to pick back up, he wasn't a part of it. He slowly pressed an elbow to the floor, until he decided he wouldn't be upsetting any pains by moving- rolled over, he picked himself up, aware he had been stabbed by a falling comrade's sword and wondering why the injury was only evident on his armor. Looking back, his gaze was drawn down, and he started at the sight of 'Lavuree, in a heap on the floor, his armor dripping blood not his. For all appearances the warrior appeared perfectly fine- yet he was unresponsive to the fight happening practically on top of him.

There were more Brutes down and more wounded than he remembered, but having no clear recollection of what had transpired, he assumed this merely meant he had been illucid for longer than he had at first thought. Pausing to verify the fallen warrior was alive in fact and not simply appearing as such, 'Lygotee wondered anew what had felled him. "Rest easy, friend. We will take care of these curs." Swiping the sword on the floor next to the albino, 'Lygotee charged back into the fray, determined to kill the Brute that did that to 'Lavuree, whichever one it was, if it wasn't already dead.

He found 'Pohamee and took position at his back even as more Brutes crowded in, firing wild shots of launcher grenades and needles.

Grunts swarmed past his knees, appearing as though out of nowhere, firing back. Needles connected midair, exploded, grenades bounced off the walls and ceiling and detonating on whatever they hit next. 'Lygotee's mandibles snapped open in awe when three of them, the ones in front, lit up just like three squatting Elites might have- they all three had shield engines! And, it seemed, had had them for long enough to know what their limit was. They stood and took as much damage as the shields would usually accept, then began to duck, roll and dodge until there were enough of the little creatures to rush the Jiralhanae front rank like a mass of Flood infection forms.

'Lygotee lowered his sword, and the discarded rifle he had picked up, watching. There was nothing left to shoot at, unless he fancied shooting Grunts. He wondered what exactly had possessed the Unggoy to do that, acting like a fleet of miniature Brutes themselves. It was unheard of, almost, Grunts volunteering into battle that way. Brutes howled and shot random rounds, firing wildly and often into their own. The Unggoy just kept coming, swarming them until they had brought down fully three dozen of the larger creatures. But when it became evident that the Grunts were not going to panic and flee, the Jiralhanae pulled back, to regroup and get shooting distance between themselves and the suddenly dangerous Unggoy.

The sight had even impressed 'Lygotee, instilling a ware of the creatures he had never once before considered respecting. He shared a look with 'Pohamee, then scanned the ranks of scattered Sangheili as they slowly picked themselves up, regathering their wits. There, in the back, behind them all, Unggoy flowing past his ankles, stood a scorched and battered white Elite, standing straight and standing tall, defiant to the universe that sought to bring him down.

'Lygotee felt a grin spread across his features. 'Pohamee looked at him, wondered at the expression, then followed his gaze until he too

spotted the lone Sangheili warrior amid the last of the Unggoy that had come. The rest of the Elites all one by one turned, too, to see what they were looking at. Mutterings could be heard from several, as many of them had never seen 'Lavuree without his ink mask before, and they all wondered who this new warrior was, to stand so erect to the press of war and death.

The Brutes had withdrawn; but they still outnumbered the Elites at least four to one, and had not ceded defeat. They would be back, if they were not met in their own territory. 'Lygotee could still feel the injury that had never truly been allowed to heal from the grenade faire the traitorous Unggoy at the airlock had shown them. He hungered for a day of quiet rest, possibly like many of the others, but any lag in the defense or press of attack would only mean they were killed in their sleep, without a fight.

He reactivated his sword, and raised it in salute to his fellow. Throughout the length of the ruined and warped hallway, all the Elites lifted what weapons they had, erupting in a chorus of roars and worts. They had persisted, remained for what that was worth, and survived to fight on. 'Lygotee let his own cry out, adding to the song.

At the far end of the hall, 'Lavuree was smiling despite himself. They had won the battle, if only this one, and he was impressed that any one of them had the strength left to roar so. Just that they could meant a great deal for morale. Exhausted and mentally weary, the change of hatred and pain for elation of victory was a nice one. The brighter, lighter emotion washed past his senses like a breath of fresh air. He had not seen so many determined and happy faces at once since before the influx of Brutes. Let them mock the defeated; some would never see the end of this war. To that end, he doubted he would, either. He was not accustomed to open combat, not on this scale. The sheer supply of enemy to kill was overwhelming, and getting them all killed was a real chore he hadn't counted on.

Somewhere along the way he had always figured they could just poison the lot of them, seal them off wherever they chose to hide, and infect their air. It wasn't the most honorable method, nor would it glorify anyone's house, but it would save countless lives and a terrible lot of trouble as well. Though disinclined to do so, and still weathering down the toll his earlier outburst had taken, he too raised his rifle, and issued forth a deep, enthusiastic wort.

Something with little bitty claws spread a hand on his thigh-armor, getting his attention. Looking down, he realized he recognized the Unggoy begging attention. It was Oahndeet. Behind his methane mask, he was smiling, and of all things at the Elite he was looking at. 'Lavuree smiled back. "Where have you been hiding?"

The Unggoy stepped back, wary of the exchange and unwilling to be that close at hand if he somehow made the Sangheili mad. "We stop Brutes, we drive them back. You alright now, Leader?"

"You did, at that, and I'm impressed. How many of you are here?" 'Lavuree asked, scanning the short sea of faces.

Oahndeet looked around, at his pack-mates and fellow Unggoy. "Plenty

are we. Me not take too many, though, more needed for other attack on other places. We needed, Leader, we needed to move, now. You ready?"

'Lavuree sighed, wearily. Of course the Brutes were not narrow-minded enough to think they could make a stand with only one fight in one hallway. He closed his eyes for a moment. "Allow me time to confer with my superior."

"Okay." Oahndeet replied. "I'm with you."

'Lavuree smiled at the smaller creature. "I know. Gather your pack-mates and count heads. I will see if there are many here who can continue." He moved past the Grunt, and through the rest between himself and 'Lygotee. He seemed somehow capable of doing so without stepping on a single one of them, though, wading easily past the crowd even as it began to reverse flow.

"Are you injured?" 'Lygotee asked. "You were unconscious when I left you."

"I am, but it is barely worth the mention. Can you still fight? The Unggoy say they came from another assault in another sector, which leads me to believe that there are probably others. We can seal the doors here and set up alarm trippers if they decided to come back through here."

'Lygotee shared a look with 'Pohamee. Looking back at 'Lavuree, he said, "You have a penchant for garnering armies from the Unggoy, don't you?"

"They are useful and resourceful, sir. I merely don't underestimate their potential as warriors." 'Lavuree explained. "There is no time for debate, however. If we mean to be of assistance to anyone of any creed, we must move now."

"Somehow I doubt I will be much use to anyoneâ€|" 'Pohamee admitted. "The muscles around my injury are beginning to cramp."

'Lygotee started at his companion, surprised he would admit such a thing. "It has?"

"â€|where do we go to meet this other threat?" 'Pohamee asked, of 'Lavuree.

The albino didn't answer, stepping up to the larger Elite instead and meeting his gaze squarely. 'Pohamee's expression turned querulous, but he nor 'Lygotee said anything. 'Pohamee straightened suddenly, as if in revelation, and released an audible breath. "Wow."

"As for whereâ€|" 'Lavuree turned to 'Lygotee. "I do not know. You will need to have one of the Unggoy show you the way, Leader."

'Lygotee's expression hovered between distaste of the Grunts' reliability and wonder at what the warrior had just done to 'Pohamee, but he mentioned nothing to either end. Instead he strode after the retreating Unggoy, calling up the other warriors as he passed them. If there was another fight, he would be there, even though he didn't want to. And if he had to call on the Unggoy to show him where, he

would, because even though he honestly didn't think that much of them, he understood that 'Lavuree didn't take matters such as these lightly and would not have led him astray.

Still, he wished the annoyingly Grunt-friendly albino would have asked them himself, so he could have heard it from 'Lavuree instead of having to speak with possibly a half a dozen Grunts before finding the one who knew. Some things just had to be so aggravatingâ€|

'Pohamee turned to 'Lavuree to ask a question when the warrior turned away, and instead wound up following him instead, going after their squad leader. He noticed as they passed them, that all the other Sangheili were watching 'Lavuree, many of them with their mandibles partly open. But if there had been any mention of a white Elite warrior in some bygone and lost prophecy or tale of old, he had missed it. One by one they all fell in behind the pair, until the whole group was moving.

Somewhere up ahead was 'Lygotee, swimming in Grunts and quite possibly hating every moment of it. 'Lavuree, on the other hand, trailing the last of the Unggoy ranks, seemed to enjoy the flood of little creatures and would on occasion swat the peak of a methane tank just to annoy the wearer- but as soon as the Grunt grumbled about it, it shut up when it turned and realized who had done it. 'Pohamee knew the reaction would not have been the same if it had been him. Something had made an impression on the Unggoy packs involving 'Lavuree, so they humored him better. 'Pohamee just couldn't figure out what that was, though.

When the combined Sangheili and Unggoy arrived at the scene of another fight, it cleaned up quickly and the matter settled so 'Lygotee was able to regroup with his team. Finding them, he took position at 'Lavuree's elbow, wanting to ask more questions but unsure where to start and if now was a good time. The albino spared a moment to touch his eyes, still getting used to working through the blinding glare of the normal lighting in the station's chambers and corridors. He had been wearing the tinted lenses for so long he had gotten used to them being normal- now it was either more starkly detailed or too bright to see much of anything.

Pausing beside a span of transparent duralloy hull, 'Lygotee looked out, spotting the Jiralhanae vessel turning about to face the \_Radiant\_'s broadside. There was a distinctive fiery luminescence around the nose of the craft, where the main cannon was positioned- but even as it charged the weapon, a compartment on the port aft blew out into vacuum in a brilliant sparkling spray, a speck of glitter too small to identify much beyond the fact it had to be a decompression. The ship listed to starboard, pressed by the impromptu jet, before correcting and accelerating at the station; the gun was cold.

"Oh, noâ€| "

"Don't." 'Lavuree said, sounding distant. "There is nothing you can do about it. You have problems closer to homeâ€| "

As if on queue, something heavy and loaded hot exploded at the end of the corridor, opening the walls, ceiling and floor equally. Elites screamed as they were mowed down by the outflung flak, and then

broiled by the pursuing fireball. Heat washed over 'Lygotee, distracting him from the window. Taking a carbine from a fallen comrade and stepping over the body, he unloaded the ammunition plug onto a Brute left standing on the other side of the spherical hole. Kig-yar could be seen on the lower floor, but more Brutes peered down from above, squatting to shoot and drop grenades.

'Lavuree flung a few back, even as 'Pohamee and the other Elites mowed down those below. Oahndeet dropped to his belly and shot between their hooves, many of his fellow pack-mates following suit. Battle was bad, but each time fire was returned, it was more likely to hit the Elite's shields than the Grunt shooting from behind them. Needles racing from his ankles got 'Lygotee's attention, and he paused to look down, but he looked up again quickly enough when a launcher grenade buffeted his shields.

"Cleansing flame!" The Sangheili beside him cried. There was no real reason to- the span was far to big to jump, and the cry was meant to allow friendlies mingled with the enemy to get out of the way. But this time, 'Lygotee felt there was never a more appropriate call when applying explosives to this enemy. The Jiralhanae infestation was going to be burned from every corner of the station, and she would be radiant indeed when that happened.

## 10. Blood To Our Blood, Steel To Our Steel

**\*\*Chapter Ten, part one:\*\***

**\*\*0722 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity\*\*\_**

Nearly all of the Engineers had been killed, cut down by crossfire between the pressed Elite duo and the crew of the \_Rampant Generosity\_. MÃ¼n Gazenee was hiding behind a far-reaching plasma coil, one of the main feeds to the ship's primary engines. He knew Hoku Zimivee was around somewhere very near, but in the heyday he had lost sight of exactly where, and had to keep minding his fire to make sure he didn't harry the poor kid worse than the enemy was.

They had been followed down here, their transparent forms hailed and recognized. MÃ¼n could never recall ever having been so badly compromised- but there was no getting out now, not like this. He had butchered his own honor trying to find a way to get Zimivee out with him- now it seemed all such a waste of time. The engines thrummed and the heat increased. MÃ¼n looked up, wondering what could possibly be going on, but unable to see anything from where he was. Brutes poured past the bodies of the Engineers, trampling on them uncaring. He sprang from hiding onto one of them, swords at play.

He had trained for this for practically his whole life, or so it felt, and he executed all of them swiftly and without so much as gaining a new injury. His special enhanced shields protected him from blast after blast of overcharge from the Jackals' pistols, but if they kept it up he would run shy of charge far faster than he was used to. A lucky Brute managed to catch him with a stiff right, and it threw him back, but he was up again instantly and cutting the arms from the beast in reply. Its ugly head followed the severed limbs to the floor, before the trunk and legs toppled down. MÃ¼n knew there were more, but he couldn't see them, and that worried him.

Brutes had never been subtle, and though they did on occasion take cover from fire, they didn't hide outright to gain advantage like the Sangheili did with their camouflage. It worried him more that he knew they were there despite not being able to see them, as that meant they were sloppy enough to be detected- or they were playing tricks, which was worse still.

He caught a glimpse of Zimivee, racing across the tops of the relay ports, spanning the gaps between them as if it was a solid ramp. His transparent form lit up for an instant with the primed grenade in his hand, but it soon left him, sailing true right into the mass in the middle of the door. Upon explosion, though, it gutted a nearby console, which unfortunately was the primary control for the activation or deactivation of the engine core. And since the ship had begun to move, that meant they were either fleeing the station or going to attack it, rip it to pieces upon discovery that taking it from the Elites was out of the question.

Mãñ smiled grimly as he cut the last near Brute down, then paused when he realized he had missed something important. Looking back, he spied the fierce glow of the terminal over the main battery containment conduit. Pacing towards it, he studied the information scrolling down. Alarm replaced his former predatory calm, and he bolted from the terminal to the last place he had seen Zimivee.

"Where are you?!" He called.

"Here! What happened?"

How had he gotten behind him? Mãñ spun on a hoof, and stared up at the younger Elite as he descended the vertical ports on the sides of the secondary plasma feed. Touching the floor, he looked around before letting his gaze rest on Mãñ. "The Brutes have pointed this ship at the \_Radiant\_. Their main weapons systems are downâ€|"

"Yes, I saw to that."

"You what? When?"

Zimivee scratched a mandible, speculatively. "I don't remember."

"Nevermind. Did you hear what I said before I mentioned the weapons?"

Zimivee nodded, offering the Mirrator agent the spent detonator switch. Mãñ took it, and looked at it.

"They've accelerated to optimal speed." He looked up. "I believe they mean to bury her in the station."

Zimivee's expression twisted. "That's insane! Why would they want to do such a thing? Brutes aren't usually suicidalâ€| or genocidal."

"They evidently suffered a defeat on that station much like here. It may be a poisoning of the well."

"That's not fair. We bled for that place!"



"The whole concept of the poisoned well is to subvert that purpose, Zimivee." MÃ¼n replied, quietly. "They don't have honor. They don't want you to keep what you have bled for, nor what you deserve or have earned. Or, for that matter, what was already yours. They can't have it, any of it, and so they altered their plans to ensure you couldn't have it either."

Zimivee sighed, seeming to sag. "I can't keep doing this. I was spent long ago."

MÃ¼n lifted his chin. "No. You aren't. If you were, you wouldn't be here, now, still fighting for what you believe. Now would you?"

"It is only an ideal that stirs my limbs to action. And it was all for nothingâ€¦"

"No!" MÃ¼n struck him a punishing blow. When Zimivee had landed on the floor and curled around the new bruise, gasping winded, he continued. "Nothing you or I have done here these days has been for nothing, and nor shall it be rendered so! I refuse to be so lightly defeated by someone else's ideal. I will fight, I will win, and I will stop them from ever achieving anything close to their goalsâ€¦ any of them."

Zimivee choked for a moment, before gathering his legs beneath him and leaning on a nearby bulkhead to get back on his hooves. "If that mattered so much to youâ€¦ whoever you are, whatever you are, why do you keep attacking me? I am not your enemy, nor have I ever sought to hinder your progress."

"Your mind is weak, Zimivee. Your very thoughts offend my honor. How dare you think of giving up just because the enemy has switched tactics! I am ashamed of you, and shamed further still to think I must work beside you."

"I am not weak!" Zimivee roared back, suddenly supporting his own weight and throwing it all at MÃ¼n. "I fear no enemy! And I swore I would rip this ship to ribbons if I had to to make sure it never harmed that station! You don't even care about them!"

"You're wrong. To think I don't care about my own kind? Wrong. We are a people only because we stand all as one, and we face down whatever is thrown at us." His tone and volume had quieted, calming even as Zimivee had prepared to fight him.

The switch was something he had come to expect, though, used to it by now, and was unconcerned. He let go of the anger invoked by the insult, and crossed his arms. "So what is your plan, mighty Mirratord warrior?"

MÃ¼n grimaced. Never there was a more infuriating aspect than to have screwed up royally and blown his cover, then have it rubbed in his face over and over by the very warrior who had caused him to slip. The expression caused Zimivee's to turn speculative, and querulous. He drew a deep breath, wondering for the first time if he could ever return from a mission like this. Casting the thought aside, he began to think more about the situation at hand. "We have to destroy her. Blow her out of the skyâ€¦ there is no way we could fight our way through the whole crew and into the command chamber in time to stop

her fromâ€| " His words trailed off as his gaze lifted, following the length of plasma conduit up from the floor. "I have an idea."

Zimivee followed his gaze, then looked back at the agent. "Will that work?"

MÃ¼n shook his head. "I don't know. But isn't it worth a try?"

Zimivee spent a moment thinking, then nodded. "Let's start making a mess, then."

Between the two of them, they began to disassemble the engine's feeds, in an effort to get the whole thing to shut down- but the work was taking forever and both understood they were running fast out of time. Finally when the time allotted for deconstruction was over, Zimivee began to think what a fair sized explosive would do in the right spot. Much of the engine was shielded, but where it wasn't was all through the inside of those conduits, especially the coolant, which wouldn't eat whatever was put in it like the plasma would. Turning to see what he had at hand, he realized more Brutes and Jackals had just arrived, and none of them had a small weapon between them.

Just as he was about to look for MÃ¼n, the Elite was suddenly introduced to the scene, slashing and slicing the enemy before many of them could even react to his arrival. Zimivee wanted to stay back and watch, fascinated by the fluid, swift motions, but he saw ahead of time that the Brutes had come in with something that looked special for them; he dove down from his perch and ran the height of the conduit cables to the floor, where he raced across to where the thrashing crowd of creatures were. His invisibility made him hard to follow once he activated it, because of the amount of motion swarming around him, but it by no means made him appear to not be there. As a whisper he sailed past and elbowed through the mass, until he reached the other Elite. The moment he broke the circle, he dove down, rolled across the short span of floor, came up on his hooves under the swords, snagged MÃ¼n by his armored vest and fired off the repellation cable he had been using to access some of the more lofty attributes of the engine. Right out of the middle of the crowd the two of them jumped, straight up, even as the Brute Captain got close enough to bring his special weapon to bear. Once up as far as they could go, MÃ¼n latched onto the surface of the ceiling as Zimivee activated the arm shield he still wore. Needles and grenades bounced from its surface, exploding hard enough to shake his perch.

MÃ¼n achieved a new position and reached back for Zimivee, holding to his place with his legs as he did so. Zimivee gave him an arm, deactivated the arm shield long enough to reach the latch cable's dis-engager catch, but he didn't ball up to reach for MÃ¼n's position, rather swinging past and under him to the next place over. There, he assessed his situation. Nothing seemed out of place, but when he looked up next he realized MÃ¼n's face was less than an inch from his own.

"When we next have time," He was saying, "you will explain to me why you just did that."

"When we next have time," Zimivee answered, "you will thank me for

doing that." With those words he pulled away and did a back-flip from his perch, down to ricochet off the top corner of the wall, from there somehow slipping through the tangled mess of looping cables and conduits above those containing plasma, to the small circular plate on top of the topmost vent duct. From there he dropped to the power banks over the maintenance ports in the plasma feeds. Flipping from these, he landed on the main battery containment conduit that fed right into the wall above the new intruder's heads. MÃ¼n couldn't close his mouth. The holes he had just slipped through were smaller than Unggoy. Yet nothing stirred in disturbance for the passing.

Finding his own way down, MÃ¼n wondered what the kid had in mind, or what he had meant when he had said MÃ¼n would thank him later for that impromptu extraction. It took him more time to reach the floor for him than for Zimivee, and it made him feel less than adequate for the situation. The kid was just too good. And it was all borne of desperation and fear. MÃ¼n had never seen anyone so terrified before—he knew why, of course. Zimivee knew he was unprepared for this kind of operation, lacking in training and time, without backup or resources, overwhelmed and outnumbered and hunted, he didn't even have the element of surprise, except on small scales like this current instance.

MÃ¼n was taken aback himself by what the younger Elite did next; Zimivee rotated to hang under the conduit over the Brute Captain's head. The weapon in that Brute's hands was visible to MÃ¼n now, and now he understood what Zimivee had meant. But how Zimivee knew what that thing was remained a mystery. He watched from too far to do anything at all and in a kind of frozen horror as Zimivee dropped right onto that Brute.

He gaped openly when he realized the twit had done it again. Twin brilliant flashes of plasma-fed razor edges appeared blossoming from the Brute's chest. The force of the thrust lifted the beast from his feet and threw him back, severed in half through the ribs. Another Brute dove for the dropped weapon, while still others crowded slashing at the empty space where Zimivee had been. MÃ¼n watched as first one Brute ducked its head, then another, then a Jackal flattened to the floor in an exploding spray of gore and blood. Zimivee had just run across their heads to the outer perimeter of the group, but as soon as the Jackal was down, the whole thing broke, Brutes and Jackals scattering all over the room and feeding crevices with fire.

MÃ¼n wondered what had happened to Zimivee for a moment, until he appeared suddenly beside him, warping the scene behind him. He held something up. "Get ready to move." He said, quietly.

MÃ¼n held up a hand, and felt the familiar touch of his twin single-bladed energy blades' handles. He smiled. "I'll have to get you your own pair someday."

"Something tells me I shouldn't hold my breath." Zimivee responded, before moving away. With an elbow across the back of a Brute's head, he flipped the creature's weapon over its own shoulder before cutting it across the back with the blade on the bottom of the weapon. Disemboweled and rendered lame all at once, the Brute dropped in its tracks howling madly. Zimivee fired all the ammunition he had for the thing at the Brute that had picked up the Captain's weapon, but only

killed it when he followed his attack with a burst of plasma from his rifle. A third Brute snatched at the weapon, but Zimivee was already on top of it. He kicked the Brute in the chin, sending it back even as he lashed out with his claws at the eyes of another. Grabbing the weapon, it faded from view, but right as he went to vacate the premises, his vicinity filled to brimming with grenades, both plasma and launcher, but the one that really hit a nerve was the one that slammed hard into the back of his arm, spikes embedding deep through the armor into his muscles, before detonating.

His arm nearly useless, his shields gone and his armor scorched, Zimivee reactivated his arm-shield, fully visible right when he didn't need to be. Fire came from all directions, and the one shield was not enough. Battered and on his knees, Zimivee reached for the activation switch on the weapon he had carefully stolen so it \_wouldn't\_ get used.

"Forgive me, MÃ¼n." He whispered, and pressed it.

**\*\*Chapter Ten, part two:\*\***

**\*\*0745 hours; Capital Ship \*\*\_\*\*Rampant Generosity \*\*\_**

MÃ¼n extended his left, cut downwards, then turned and his right shot out and stabbed through the face of another. He moved to the beat of his hearts, stepping in tune to an internal rhythm. He had his enemies well in hand until something near to the left exploded loudly. A gap in the Brutes allowed him to see what had happened, and the picture proved grim and devastating.

A cry escaped him, and he dove that direction, swords slashing madly to clear a path to the younger Elite. Zimivee was down, and could not last. Right before MÃ¼n would have leapt the gap between them and pulled the kid back from that maelstrom of fire, all sound went suddenly very dead, and an unreal silence pounded the chamber like thunder.

A silent whisper reached him, \_"Forgive me, MÃ¼n."\_ A half second later, the whole room turned white and a shockwave followed the glow. MÃ¼n was swept from his hooves, blasted back and down, scraped across the floor and embedded in a pile of crushed Brutes against the far wall. Fire seared across his face, burning so hot and billowing at him so fast his shields could not handle it; even augmented they sputtered and failed inside of three seconds, bathing him in the fury of a sun.

MÃ¼n screamed, his skin turned brackish before the final Brute hit, burying him between layers of enemy. Though it hurt to be hit so, he was grateful for the coverage, as now the Brute was catching what he would have endured otherwise. When silence again filled the engine room, MÃ¼n peeled the blackened bones of the Brutes from his scorched armor, pushed the broiled remains off his front, and dragged himself to stand though he knew he shouldn't. Pain lanced through his legs as cooked scabs of flesh cracked when he bent them, but he ignored it all as best he could. That explosion had been more than he had counted on. He had seen that kind of weapon before- it was Forerunner, but he had never seen it used. Evidently, he decided, it belonged on a vessel, not in some Brute's hands.

Slowly he staggered across the floor, stepping past the whisper-thin

bones of Jackals. Most of them had not made it away before being roasted to nothingness. There were no remains save organic soot within a certain radius, but what he found at the very center surprised him.

Soot-streaked, Zimivee appeared none the worse for wear save the flak embedded in his hide- and the chunk that looked like it had been bitten from the back of one of his arms. MÃ¼n sagged to his knees, gasping with lungs that wouldn't assimilate air as efficiently as they used to. He rolled the youth over, took the weapon, and looked at it. To shoot it as a gun it had half the charge left. But the primary blast wave mode would only work one more time.

MÃ¼n had an idea.

Tucking the weapon in a hidden corner for later retrieval, he lifted Zimivee and began to carry him from the scene. It took what felt an eternity, but MÃ¼n was in a hurry. Down to the seraph bays he went, stepping into the gravity lift of one once he had it active. The bays were clear for reasons unknown, perhaps a lack of personnel, but he wasn't complaining. Once inside, he strapped Zimivee into the copilot's seat, and touched the controls on the bird. Ten minutes later, he rose to leave.

Turning back, he looked at the limp Elite he had come to think of as his protégé. Zimivee had been learning from him, absorbing everything he saw the agent do. There was no other way he could have learned to use MÃ¼n's swords. Taking them in hand, MÃ¼n looked at them. He wouldn't be needing them anymore, and he had promised he would get a pair for the kidâ€¦

MÃ¼n set the pair of hilts on the controls, turned and left, exiting the seraph in time to watch it fly out of the bay on autopilot. He raised a hand. "Take good care of them for me, Hoku." He muttered, watching until the little fighter was out of sight. Turning away from the scene, MÃ¼n reactivated his camouflage and began the trek back to the engine room. It wasn't far, but he was feeling his injuries despite his dismissal of them before he arrived. Once there, shy of breath and blood and the burned places weeping clear fluid, MÃ¼n pried the Forerunner weapon from the hiding place and hooked it on his belt. He began to climb the conduits, until he heard the telltale gurgling of the fluid inside. He wished he had his swords, suddenly, but he was able without them and he knew it.

The door below him opened, and more Brutes filed in, this time with more standard weaponry. MÃ¼n looked down at them, but they didn't see him, hanging above their heads on the half-disassembled engine. Taking a breath, he activated his comm. "Nightbird, respond."

Pylori would be annoyed at him, he supposed, but they had been friends, if briefly, and the other agent deserved to know. "\_This is Nightbird. What happened to you? You sound like the air has a sulfuric content.\_"

MÃ¼n smiled. "I am wounded. I will not be coming out. But my mission will be completed. I'm going to blow her, Nightbird. Obtain optimal safe distanceâ€¦"

"\_No! Have you lost your mind?? You don't need to kill yourself on this, MÃ¼n! Do you hear me? Get out of there, I can shoot her out

from here.\_"

MÃ¼n shook his head, trying to clear it. "But I'm already dead, Nightbird." If anyone was listening, they could know his name. That was alright. He was deadâ€| but he couldn't give them Pylori, because that member was alive and well and still of good use to the Mirratord. MÃ¼n tried to inhale, but it tasted like smoke and he couldn't hardly assimilate any of it. Feeling suffocated, he pulled his helmet off, though he knew it wouldn't help. "I have to do this, Nightbird. I can't let everything be for nothing. I got him out, he'll liveâ€| make sure the seraph fighter makes it to the station. He's hurt, might bleed out. Tell theâ€|" He ran out of air, unable to speak further. His body was trying to cough, but he couldn't.

He heard Pylori sigh tiredly. "\_Goodbye, friend. I will issue a reportâ€|you know your oaths. You know what will happen once you are gone.\_"

MÃ¼n got in a breath, and with it he began to whisper as he primed the Forerunner weapon once more. "We are the Mirratord. We strike with speed and stealth. Our enemies will not see their deaths. They will not know their fate. In darkness, we will see light. In light, we will see darkness. No matter the location, we will see victory. If we fail, no one will know. Like a ghost, our presence is a mystery. For the honor of the Mirratord."

Pylori whispered back. "\_For the honor of the Mirratord.\_"

"â€|don't let them kill him, Raptor. Don't condemn him before you see himâ€|" MÃ¼n pushed the weapon down into the conduit through the hole he had made, from which was gushing the coolant. The weapon sank deep, going straight for the engine's main core compartment where the coolant flowed deepest.

Looking back at the floor where the Brutes were, he saw the first one look up to see where the coolant was coming from. MÃ¼n felt lightheaded, but the pain had faded. He smiled, pleasantly. They would never see this coming. They would never succeed, would never destroy the station. Lifting Zimivee's detonator switch, he looked at it. "This isâ€| is for youâ€| kid." He wheezed, and pressed it.

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Zimivee woke with a start in a rush of agony so overwhelming he couldn't speak. When the pain resided, he realized where he was, and looked immediately for MÃ¼n. Not seeing him at first, he tried to turn to see if he were in the back, but fire raced up his arm and stalled the motion. He spent a moment looking at the controls, and trying to steady his breath, going over the last thing he could remember. The engine room came to him clearly, like some nightmare, and he tried again to look for MÃ¼n.

"Are you there?" He called, desperate to know he hadn't killed the Elite. Disengaging the straps, he pulled from the seat, and looked into the back of the ship. It would only hold about six people, tops, but he was the only one in it. And there was no where else to look where MÃ¼n might hide. Why would he have his camouflage active here? "MÃ¼n?" He asked again, of the emptiness.

The ship rocked, bits of hard objects zinging off the hull, turning his attention to the fore again. Taking it off autopilot long enough to turn it about, he saw the last piece- the nose of the craft- of the Rampant Generosity sink into the consuming fireball she was transforming into. Zimivee sat frozen in horror, the light of truth dawning on him even as he tried to deny it. If MÃ¼n wasn't aboard, there was only one other place he could be. Zimivee peeled his eyes from the scene, shaken, and stared numbly at the board of controls in front of him. His arm throbbed mercilessly, as did much of the rest of him, so he began by shedding his armor. Digging into the onboard medical supplies, he applied bandage to the worst of his injuries, but left the rest, and sat down in the pilot's seat wearing nothing but his under-suit. It was as full of holes as his armor, but he couldn't remove the flak embedded in the armor without a set of good tools, and much of that flak was sticking out on the inside, where it would irritate him even if it wasn't all on injuries.

His gaze came to rest on two identical items resting on the controls in front of him, and locked there. MÃ¼n's swords. Tentatively he reached up, and touched one, running his fingers over their cold metal. It seemed something odd to him, that the agent might leave his most prized possessions hereâ€¦ what had he done? Why had he left them? Zimivee scanned the board, looking away from them.

A single light was on, indicating a recorded message, either from the comn or direct. Wondering what it could contain, Zimivee touched the control to replay it, and sat back to listen as the last sparkling rays from the Rampant Generosity faded from view. She was gone forever, now, and with her was MÃ¼n. The autopilot, restored to active, turned him back to the station Radiant once more.

"\_You must wonder why. I would, were I you. We are not the same, you and I. Yet at the same time, we share more similarities than you might presume. I was like you, once. When I was young and facing down too much on my own. I thought I was special, thoughâ€¦ I had the misfortune to be born to a wealthy family, and it made me think I was better than the others. I had privilege. I had everything I wanted, but nothing I needed. You asked me what the Mirrator wasâ€¦ the Mirrator was what made me who I am, what caused my vision to clear. They allowed me to see all my mistakes, and how I could become all I only thought I was. If I had found you while I was younger, before the Mirrator, I would have killed you to mask my own inadequacies. You rose to the challenge, Zimivee, and you made me proud and jealous all at once. You can be so much more than you are. How do you learn so quickly? How do you do what you do, and do it with such grace? The first time I held my swords, I cut myself on them. Many of us do. You never did. You used them like they were a part of you, like you had been using them for longer than even I. I was impressed with your skill and execution, and how quickly you came to ideas and conclusions where others might have slowed or stopped altogether.\_

"\_I am honored to have known you, Zimivee. I just wanted you to know that. For all we disagreedâ€¦ I saw a reflection of myself, when I was your age. But I could only dream of being like you then. You embodied all I wished I was. Do you understand? I want you to erase this after you hear it. The Mirrator are a secret, and I would wish them to remain that way for as long as we might.\_

"\_Become what you may, Zimivee, grow and learn, but stay wise in your choices and never stray from whatever it is that guides you. I can only wish I had had such a guidance as yours. As you must by now know, The Brute vessel was destroyed. Yes, if you wondered, I was there. And by the time you hear this, I will have died with her. I did not go lightly, though- do not think me shallow enough to think I would become a martyr of any sort. I am Mirrator, and when I die I cease to exist. I never was. I do not aim to be remembered. But I felt it was necessary for me to explain a few things for you, since you kept me alive for as long as you did. My injuries will kill me even if I do nothing to aid or abet them. I wanted you to have my swords- keep them clean, keep them close and keep them charged. They will serve you well. \_

"\_One more thing."\_ The recording went silent for a time, several seconds ticking by in silence. Zimivee looked down at it. \_"Do not mention me to those aboard the station. I do not want to risk anyone knowing enough to take what you tell them to someone who could hurt our operations. We stay in the shadows for a reason. \_\_We are the Mirrator. We strike with speed and stealth. Our enemies will not see their deaths. They will not know their fate. In darkness, we will see light. In light, we will see darkness. No matter the location, we will see victory. If we fail, no one will know. Like a ghost, our presence is a mystery. For the honor of the Mirrator. Goodbye, Zimivee. And take care of yourself."\_

The recording clicked, signalling its end. Zimivee shook his head, and told the computer to delete it, just as MÃ¼n had asked. "You will never cease to be weird, old man." He muttered. "But I thank you for the swords."

**\*\*Chapter Ten, part three:\*\***

**\*\*0830 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

'Lavuree was out in front and in plain view when 'Lygotee saw the Elite crumple to the floor, apparently in some sort of fit. In all their years working together, though, he had never known the warrior to ever succumb to such an affliction- and it worried him that somehow some toxin had been introduced somewhere. Past his right 'Pohamee dove forward, charging right through the Brute ranks using all his muscle to shove a path to the convulsing albino. It was good that the current fight was near to finished, better that it had played in favor to the Sangheili, and 'Lygotee was able to meet his teammate at the site of their fallen comrade quickly enough.

'Lavuree had stilled his twitching, by then, and hung limp and gasping in 'Pohamee's arms. "What happened? Are you injured?" 'Lygotee asked, confused by the events.

'Lavuree opened his eyes for a moment, to look at his Commander, and past his labored breath he answered as best he could. "Theyâ€ they're allâ€ dead. Allâ€ of them."

'Lygotee and 'Pohamee shared a look. "What?"

'Lavuree struggled to regain his hooves, but in the end 'Pohamee still had to help. He shook his head, as though dazed, and attempting to clear it. "So manyâ€" He muttered.



"What are you going on about, 'Lavuree?" 'Pohamee asked, keeping one hand on his friend's shoulder to steady him.

'Lavuree rested his face in his hands for a moment, before meeting their gazes. "I apologizeâ€¦ it is justâ€¦ I am unused to hearing so manyâ€¦ all at onceâ€¦ it becomes too much to shut out, Leader, when they are many. Something happened to that shipâ€¦ would you not be staggered, sir, if you had heard a thousand voices cry out, and thenâ€¦ silenced? I was unprepared for suchâ€¦"

"Never mind it, 'Lavuree." 'Lygotee dismissed. "I had not realizedâ€¦ are you saying, by some means, that the vessel the Brutes brought with them has been destroyed?"

'Lavuree only nodded.

'Pohamee swore softly under his breath. "So it \_was\_ trueâ€¦"

'Lygotee looked at him oddly. "What was true?"

"You didn't hear word that the Brute's vessel had been infiltrated? They left the docking ring for that very reason, to try to keep us from it. It would seem they failedâ€¦ I can only imagine how someone was able to destroy the whole vessel from the inside, though. He must be an awesome warrior."

"He wasn't alone."

'Lygotee and 'Pohamee looked down, at 'Lavuree. "Who wasn't?" 'Lygotee asked.

"The warrior of which you speak." 'Lavuree answered. "He wasn't alone. They did it together, but one of them died. He wasn't aloneâ€¦ but he is now."

"Who?" 'Lygotee asked. "Who is it?"

'Lavuree shrugged. "He mourns the loss of his companionâ€¦ and much is lost in the shadows of grief. You will see soon enoughâ€¦ he will be here, soon."

"I wonder what magic he possesses to have so utterly defeated an entire carrier with only one other at his side." 'Pohamee mused. "I would very much like to meet this great warrior."

'Lavuree smiled at them. "You already have." With those words, the albino Sangheili moved from between them, past the last of the dead Brutes across to and through the rest of the Elites gathered to fight them, and up to the ranks of Unggoy. He surveyed them, looking them over, and each and all stood straight and proud, as if happy to be inspected. Having learned to distinguish them long ago, 'Lavuree was able to pick Oahndeet from the crowd easily enough, and motioned the Grunt forward.

The rest of the Elites watched in wonder as he did as bid, showing no fear and tottering to a stop just inches from 'Lavuree's armored knees. 'Lavuree, oddly enough, squatted to see the Unggoy at his level, resting his arms on his thighs. "How many of you

remain?"

Oahndeet tipped his head, thinking. "We plenty, Leader. You no worry. We go and we fight- me no doubt we able still. Where we go now, Leader?"

'Lavuree gave that some thought, but if any Brutes were left living nearby, they were being very quiet. "We may not go anywhere as yet." He decided. "Gather your Grunts, get a head-count, make sure none are missing. I will speak to my Commander, and we will see what happens next."

Oahndeet nodded enthusiastically, and turned away, chittering and barking at the other Grunts, who all seemed just as excited. 'Lavuree straightened, watching for a moment, before turning to see through the gathered Elites to where 'Lygotee and 'Pohamee stood watching. Spanning the group, he counted the questioning looks, the noncomprehensive stares he was getting from most of them. They didn't understand what made the Grunts so cooperative and eager around him, didn't know why he had bothered to treat them like anything more than cannon fodder and most never would.

'Lavuree started back through them, but 'Lygotee had started moving too, and met him halfway, right in the middle of them all. 'Pohamee, like some kind of hulking bodyguard, wasn't far behind. 'Lavuree waited for his Commander to speak first, but all 'Lygotee did was stare at him, as if trying to peel back a layer of skin with just his eyes. Whatever it was he meant, it wasn't working, but it made 'Lavuree want to squirm, unsure what his superior was getting after. Finally, to break the ice, he ventured to speak. "Leader?"

'Lygotee tipped his head, speculatively. "What else do you know that we do not? What secrets lie inside you that could help us all?"

'Lavuree frowned, then. "Sir, I resent that accusation. I am not, nor was I ever, privy to the actions of the enemy. I can only tell you what my senses tell me, and only when they tell me. Nothing is withheld, nor is anything premeditated. I haven't any more idea what the Jiralhanae will do next than you, at present." He paused to see if 'Lygotee would rebuke him, but when he didn't, he added, "If you want to ask something of relevance, I will hear it, and give the best answer I know how. But do not presume I already know everything."

'Lygotee nodded, his expression pensive, and looked away. "The Brute Commander is out there somewhere and he still has some troops to call on." His head swung back, and he locked stares with 'Lavuree. "Do we know where?"

'Lavuree's eyes narrowed, giving 'Pohamee the impression he was either hiding something or attempting to pry their Commander's mind. Neither seemed likely, though, as neither would really help the situation. Besides- what else could he possibly have to hide, after landing a doozy like the one he had on them? If there was anything better, 'Pohamee would have liked to see it. At last, 'Lavuree's expression relaxed, and he appeared to have come upon an answer. Everyone was listening, this time, not just the team. "He isn't close somewhere aft." His eyes narrowed again. "Moving,

thoughâ€| "

'Lygotee nodded, satisfied. "And well he should be. Wherever he hides, we will find him and carve him out, along with the last of his wretched Jiralhanae kin!"

A chorus of agreeing words rose from the gathering of Elites. 'Lygotee nodded to them all. "We shall see the end of this, brothers, do not fear. We have them cornered- and they no longer have a starship! Our victory is near." He returned his gaze to 'Lavuree, after he was done. "Is there anything else?"

'Lavuree cocked his head. "Just one other thing."

"Let's hear it, then."

"If you challenge himâ€| you will die."

'Lygotee's face wrinkled in disgust. "Who then shall kill him? We certainly will not tolerate his persistence."

"You won't have to." 'Lavuree said. "But though he will die, and by Sangheili handsâ€| those will not be yours. He may come for you, though, considering you escaped him before, and he will want to satisfy his lust for your blood, which was denied him. You mustn't let him, Leader, do not allow him to get close."

'Lygotee snarled at him, and turned away. "I do not aim to die a hero, 'Lavuree. If I am challenged, it is upon my honor to meet that."

"Would you perish needlessly, then, when you could easily rebuke his challenge, and get to watch him die despite?" 'Lavuree asked, quietly.

'Lygotee turned back to his subordinate, and struck him across the head with a fist. "Nothing you say will make me spell my own ruin! Spit upon your own honor if that is what you want to do! Leave mine where it lay, and let me decide what happens to it."

'Pohamee stepped back, alarmed at the sudden odds between friends. He hadn't ever known his Commander to attack one of his own this way, even after trading insults. But 'Lavuree hadn't insulted him; he had merely told him what 'Pohamee had come to think of as a warning based upon a very solid foundation of evidence. 'Lavuree had been right too many times to dismiss him now. Having been half-turned round by the blow, 'Lavuree spent a moment tasting his bloodied mandibles, looking at the floor, before turning his head back to see 'Lygotee.

"Do not presume to believe I mean you ill, Leader." His eyes narrowed. "Never that." 'Pohamee thought for sure there would be a fistfight, following that statement, but all that happened next was 'Lavuree's turn from the scene and departure. The act left 'Lygotee feeling stripped of his position in the conflict, reduced to grime on the floor. All heads turned to follow 'Lavuree's retreat, his back turned on 'Lygotee for what felt like the very first time. He wondered if he had erred, accusing the one warrior he had always counted on of the one thing he shouldn't have- and he wondered suddenly if he had lost that faith.

The empty chill in his chest made him madder, though at himself and not 'Lavuree, but he couldn't bring himself to chase the warrior down and apologize. His gaze found the floor, and lingered there as the crowd of Sangheili dispersed, filing away to other places.

"Three days ago you two would never have fought so, Leader."  
'Pohamee's voice found his ear. "But then, three days ago" none of us would have fought so."

'Lygotee looked up to reply, but found him too walking away, leaving the premises. He could only stand there and stare after them all, barely able to believe he had just witnessed his own fall, himself. Was everyone abandoning him? The lonesome feeling he had courted in the Academy crept up behind him, tingling his senses and chilling his bones. Everything he had built since then had begun to crumble at the behest of a single argument. But it hadn't just been that. 'Lygotee knew he had erred when he allowed himself to strike out, should have known what that would get him.

Strangely, the accosted had not struck back. But he knew why, now, knew what made his friend tick. 'Lavuree would never allow anything out of character, but what character that was was not his true one. 'Lygotee had come to that on his own, at the revelation of power. 'Lavuree was hiding something else- it was his nature. He had been keeping things sealed away for so long he didn't know how to be fully open or honest, but though he had revealed to them the first part, there was something else- and no matter what else happened, he was never going to let go of that secret.

That one, last secret.

## 11. Reveille

**\*\*Chapter Eleven, part one:\*\***

**\*\*0921 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

The Seraph drifted through the bay doors, settling over the decks several feet from the circumventing veranda. Elites stood on the bridge between the one half and the other, and on the veranda- more still hovered nearby on the floor beneath the Seraph, but none ventured near enough to be caught by the vessel's guns. It had come from the Brute-controlled Rampant Generosity, and what it contained was to be seen.

Dial M'akamee watched as the gravity lift plates retracted, and the beam touched the floor beneath the vessel, the faint purple glow it gave reminding him of a certain warrior's eyes. The bird seemed to sit there like that for several unnecessary minutes, but no one moved or spoke. Plasma rifles hovered at the ready, pointed in from all around the room. Dial's own carbine rested in his hands, though for now it was pointed at the floor in front of his left hoof. If there was a Brute inside, he would have enough time to raise it when it appeared at the top of the beam.

The soft hum of the mechanism changed, though slightly, signaling it now had cargo, and an Elite descended the beam, alone. Dial's eyes widened, and he stepped back, recoiling in shock. The look in the warrior's eyes was enough alone to cripple any that looked there, a

hollow, resonant well brimming with resentment, pain and hatred. The amount of flak embedded in the warrior's armor was tell enough for what hell he had seen and walked through. His face was likened to made of stone, expressionless and betraying nothing. The damage to it was the sole testament that he was, in fact, just a Sangheili. Dried blood clung to his armor, much of it having once flowed in the veins of a Brute. He scanned the room, taking in the receiving party, then looked at Dial.

The Supreme Commander felt he was being bored into, by those eyes, their cold an equal to that of the open and empty of space. He watched as the warrior placed the items in his hands back on his belt, but only once they were there did he recognize what they were; swords. Or something that looked a lot like a pair of energy swords, but the Elite had not activated them. He took three paces towards Dial, and saluted. "Supreme Commander." The greeting was nothing if not empty. Dial nodded in reply; he had no words for that vacuum to swallow. He knew he would not be heard. Taking a step to one side, he allowed the warrior to pass, and as he did Dial realized how small and young the warrior was; none he had met that young had had those eyes. He was an adult, if just, but something had kept him from getting very big. The fact had been lost on Dial at first due to the commanding, and overwhelming, nature of the warrior within.

Whatever he had done to the Brutes, they had done something far worse to him, and Dial knew without asking that he didn't ever want to know what it was. He signaled the warriors above and around him, and a pair ascended into the Seraph to be sure it was empty, as the rest departed with Dial. The inspection proved the vessel empty, but nothing could explain the nature of what happened aboard the Rampant Generosity. Dial followed the newcomer down the corridors to the sustenance chamber, and watched him walk to a specific table before he sat down. He placed a spread hand on the surface, looking at it as if the place, the object, had some significance. Entering through another door, an Elite he had come to know rather well paused when he spied the youth at the table. Enin 'Lygotee was alone, though, which made Dial wonder what had become of his team- the trio were nigh inseparable.

Hoku Zimivee lifted his eyes, hollow and cold, to follow 'Lygotee as he walked to the table. He stopped shy of seating himself, though, and stared down at the newly arrived warrior.

"Commander." Zimivee said, tonelessly.

"We thought you dead." 'Lygotee mentioned, his voice barely audible at first. "What happened?"

"I destroyed the ship." Zimivee answered, plainly. Looking up at the older warrior, the one who had sent him away the first time, the one who had put him where he needed to be, where MÃ¼n had been, where he had performed possibly the most important action of his entire career. "As any in my place would have."

'Lygotee doubted that. But he didn't let it show in his face as he absorbed the news. "Was there anyone elseâ€¦ with you?" He felt something inside stagger as he watched the youth nod his head. Once more 'Lavuree was right. And how had he known? Who had told him? He hadn't been anywhere where he might have spoken to someone who would know. But the fact- just the fact- that 'Lavuree was right, again,

made him feel all the more the fool. "Who?"

Zimivee's eyes traced the outline of the table he was sitting in front of. He had gained a great deal of gall to take his gaze from a superior during a conversation, 'Lygotee mused, but the age of his eyes had frozen any protest or retribution where they stood. "His name was MÃ¼n Gazenee. He was the reason I was able to escape alive."

"Where is this MÃ¼n Gazenee now?"

Zimivee's head snapped up, and his gaze bored hard and deep through 'Lygotee. The Commander took an unconscious step back. "MÃ¼n is dead."

This was not the same warrior 'Lygotee had sent on that mission, long before all the mayhem had happened. This was someone else; someone who had seen too many things, had been through too much, and had watched someone die. This was a warrior who was capable of anything, grown cold and bitter for the time lag that allowed it all to sink in. He had found something wonderful, had tried to keep it, make something of it, and been stripped of it before he might have done a single thing. He had been grown, stripped of any and all semblance of adolescence, and pushed too far too fast. 'Lygotee had been through some terrible things, but it had all been gradual, the road most warriors traveled, whereas Zimivee had seen it all at once.

Treading the very razor's edge of life and death, and being the only one to come free of it aliveâ€| and alone. But whether he was truly still living was to be seenâ€| and if he was, after all, still warm inside, 'Lygotee knew he would be very surprised.

He looked past the Elite sitting at the same table where he had last seen him, at the station's commanding officer. Dial's expression told him he had gotten the same reception off the kid; there had been something lost on that ship- Zimivee had gone with hope of victory and survival, and to come back the way he wasâ€| his zest for life had faded. There was nothing eager anymore about him, nothing allowing for humor. But even with this loss, he had brought back with him much honor for his bloodline, and whoever his companion had been- MÃ¼n Gazenee didn't ring any bells for 'Lygotee- as well. The Covenant could have had use for such warriors as like what had become of Zimivee, but the Covenant had died with the first of their number, when the Brutes brought the civil war to their distant doorstep.

They could only wonder what had become of their brethren, those trapped on the Ring and in the middle of the Human war. Those issues would need to be addressed later, though, when such time was available as could be spared for it.

'Lygotee looked back down at Zimivee, and drew a breath. "And the vessel is no longer a threat?"

"No longer a threat." Zimivee echoed the words, as if merely wishing to taste them. He didn't appear to have heard 'Lygotee's question.

Taking that as a yes, 'Lygotee turned and left, wishing his skin would stop crawling. Being so near Zimivee in that state of being was

beginning to get to him, and when looked upon he felt full of holes, bored into by the youth's cold, ancient eyes. He would be something else to deal with, but later. He could almost see the final number of Brutes gathering in the still for the final conflict. He wanted to hunt them down and kill them while they were scattered, but he didn't have authorization for it, and for now Dial seemed content to think rather than act. Whenever the Brutes turned up again, there was plenty of resources and sufficient numbers of Sangheili to meet them in whatever machinations they set up, and still crush them.

Stepping from the sustenance chamber, 'Lygotee turned left and walked down the corridor with no particular destination in mind. He wanted to be rid of the Jiralhanae problem so he might consider unraveling the enigma that was his friend- the more that happened here the more he realized he had never truly known the warrior at all- but that strange, steadfast loyalty, that unshakeable faith, held- and he wasn't really sure he wanted to know why. The more he learned of 'Lavuree, the more he knew he couldn't think of him the same, and the less he liked his circumstances.

It was the last secret that kept nagging at him- the one 'Lavuree would never, ever let go of, the one that all others had built up from, that one single mystery that would truly reveal all the truths of the warrior beneath the mask. He wasn't sure how he knew it was there, or how he knew that that one was what the rest stemmed from, but he was sure that it was, in fact, the final layer. And what frightening revelation lay behind that final layer was what he feared to see. He wanted to stay friends with 'Lavuree, wanted to preserve that alien faith for as long as he might, but the longer things continued, and the more things came unraveled due to the crumbling of the Holy Covenant, the closer he came to that final layer.

He understood one thing, as much as he might, though; he did not, under any circumstances, need to make an enemy of that Elite. His hooves stopped, and when he realized they had, he looked up, aware he had been too far gone to realize where his hooves had taken him. He relaxed when he saw he hadn't wandered alone into enemy territory, but a new tension came upon him when he spotted 'Lavuree also. 'Pohamee was there, as was SzÄ™naqee, but all three were looking straight at 'Lygotee like they expected a speech like the one he had given prior to the beginning of this end. His expression changed, telling them where to put it, and he walked on past.

'Lygotee didn't want to be cruel, but he was in no mood to humor 'Lavuree, or 'Pohamee either, and anything SzÄ™naqee had to say probably wasn't worth his time.

"Enin."

Despite his dour mood, 'Lygotee stopped, though he hesitated a moment before turning to see which of them had dared to call him that. Apart from the other two and closing the gap between them, 'Lavuree stood prominently within view, blocking the way he had just come from. The smaller Elite stopped a respectful distance from the Commander, and rested there.

"If you wish to say something, then get it out. Because if you carry this into battle your head will not be in the fight and you will not be able to perform correctly as the situation demands." 'Lavuree warned. "Get it out. Speak your mind."

"Who are you to say the way things are, Rkwa?" He hissed. "Where do you get this information??" He knew his tone did not need to be so unforgiving, especially when it was he who ought to have been seeking redemption, but he couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice. "Who are you, really? And why are you hiding from us? I thought I could trust you."

"Leader, Iâ€|"

"I don't even know you, Rkwa."

'Lavuree sighed. "I am not changed from the warrior you have known all these years, 'Lygotee. I do not lead a double life. I am all that you see- oh, perhaps some things you cannot see, but they are few, and vastly insignificant. Who am I, you ask? Do you not know? You have walked with me into the fire, and out again, and seen me within it. What I ask, Commander, is who I am, without you."

'Lygotee gave a start. "â€|what?"

"As one I am hardly worth notice." 'Lavuree elaborated. "I am nothing without my friends- without my brothers." He gestured at 'Lygotee. "Yourself, 'Pohamee, all the others who's lives I have touched."

"How do you touch them, though? What makes you special in that you can have that strange, alien power that no one else has?"

"You all have it, too, Leader, to a degree. I have only learned how to harness it and make it more than a simple thought. I'm far from special- if you single me out and make me apart from all the rest, am I not isolated? Friendless, lostâ€| scorned, for what it is worth? I am here to help you- not harm you, yet you only think what ill I mean when you lash out at me because you do not understand. I cannot spell it out for you, 'Lygotee, I am not a book, nor have I an index."

The reference forced a wan smile from 'Lygotee. "Alright, you win." He huffed.

'Lavuree straightened, slightly. "Win? Win what?"

"Never mind. Tell me aboutâ€| tell me about the Brute's Commander."

'Lavuree crossed his arms, and frowned speculatively at the other Elite. "Will it earn me another ill-gotten bruise?"

'Lygotee cringed, knowing that he had had that coming. "No. I will listen this time."

"You had best."

**\*\*Chapter Eleven, part two:\*\***

**\*\*1014 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

Doaedemet stood looking over the seemingly cavernous chambers he was within. Along the walls were endless places an Elite might hide, but he was changing that- for as much as it pained him to so deface the



Prophets' Proclamation Chamber, it was necessary. Here was where the numerous Prophets came when they had something to say, something for the Covenant to hear. Mercy had been there, recently, at the high end under the window. Some of the most important Jiralhanae he had ever met had been with the Prophet, toting the marks of Honor Guard- a place long coveted by his people.

That they had gotten it meant that things had begun to change, and soon all that had been for so long denied his people would be granted them, and the despicable wretches that had held prestige over them would be soon getting their due. How it riled him to know he had lost, here! Not a single trap laid, not a single mine placed, not a single captive taken, had helped him at all, and he was at his wits' end. Hence the reconstruction happening around him, numerous Kig-yar and Yanime'e loosening pieces of the room's architecture and lowering them to the waiting Brutes below for removal to another site. They would all be returned, of course, but in due time.

Doaedemet let his lip curl in anticipation. He had been careful. He had instructed them to leave the leaders to him, on pain of death and dismissal of existence, so that he might savor their deaths personally as he crushed them under his fist- looking over at the wall where the transparent metal ended in standard violet hull plating, his snarl turned into a hideous grin. Leaning on aforesaid wall was as much of a likeness to the hammer of the leaders of old as he could muster- a non-gravity-enabled Fist of Rukt. He had heard of the death of his predecessor, and then personally witnessed the vessel going up in a ball of white plasma the size of a small sun. It made him angry that the Elites had gotten so much from him so fast, so easily- but things would be different this time. Now he was leading, he was High Chieftain of this Station, and he would claim it with all his might as was his right, upon the passing of his father, Throug.

Curling his paws into fists, he swore a blood-oath against the Elites, promising their utter defeat and destruction, promising once he had the Radiant as his own he would sweep the quadrant clean of the malicious parasites and claim the grounds for the rightful heirs, Jiralhanae all. Running his eyes over the insectoid Yanime'e and the avian-like Kig-yar, his lip curled in disgust.

No, there was no room for those either, even if they were useful at present. Neither species was really a problem, though, and as long as the Prophets decreed it, Doaedemet would permit them to persist. When that changed, though- he would look forward to the day he would again saturate his fur with fresh blood in the names of the Prophets and their Gods. Perhaps he might travel in the Great Journey before needing to bother-? A mocking smile spread across his features, and he hefted the replica of the hammer into his arms, to cradle its feel. Even if it was fake, the Fist was only a symbol in the end, and so was this- symbolic, of his rule.

Doaedemet turned to see the work being done at his behest, and savored the feel of it- he took it in with satisfaction, convinced he would feel more of the same in the years to come in his campaign against the Sangheili. Someday soon, there would be no more of the heretical wretches, even if they only burned to death in the fires of the Great Journey. It pleased him to know none could escape, for that one single fact, and he issued a bellow across the cavernous chamber to express that

belief.

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Preparations completed for as much as they could be, most of the warriors rested sufficiently and fed, Dial felt confident he could rise and meet the Brutes without exhaustion playing into the enemy's hands. He had no idea how many truly remained, but he knew he would soon find out, so he had most of the station's compliment ready to move, leaving behind only those too weak from injury or fatigue to fight.

Looking over the rows of faces one more time, the Supreme Commander shook his head. He hated doing this- not the riddance of traitorous Jiralhanae, but the feeding of his Elites into a slaughter he knew all too little about. What had caused the Covenant to break so? They knew it had, and what the repercussions had been, but that was all. He swore silently he would find out, if he survived this final run, not for himself but for them- each and every one deserved to know what and why, as much as the rest.

Unggoy wobbled on their feet, anxious and nervous, some huddling to the floor at the hooves of their team leaders. The numbers looked sufficient, the math appeared sound, but Dial knew something would go wrong, and many would die what didn't need to. It was the law of the universe- something always did. Sighing, he nodded his approval, and the first of the bunch moved out, going past and straight for the Brute's territory. Station sensors had placed the enemy within a certain sector, but where precisely and what they had in store for any assault was to be seen.

Field Commander Enin 'Lygotee had taken position behind the first wave, certain after his last discussion with 'Lavuree that he did not under no uncertain terms want to be in the first wave. His team was with him, and there were six Unggoy at hand, but thankfully no one had tried to patch his team with a fourth member that would have been a fifth wheel- straight into a battle was no way to learn a new member, but with the others outside his team's circle he felt he could handle it- if given responsibility for someone he couldn't direct, he knew disaster would strike. 'Pohamee, for instance, often got given edited orders so when he interpreted them, it came out right.

'Lavuree had his own way of reading things, though, a prime example that everyone was different. He had reapplied the ink, and had garnered new lenses, disappearing back into the crowd from whence he had come, looking like nothing special or unusual, just one more Sangheili warrior amid a thousand. 'Lygotee had to admit he was glad for the return to 'normal', for what that was worth, considering normal had never been real. He could look now at the warrior without starting, without needing to remind himself of who he was really looking at. It had been a startling revelation, how much he relied upon what his eyes told him. 'Pohamee seemed better off for the transition as well, but they seemed to be the only two that still recognized him; everyone else was exchanging tales, often exaggerated, of the white Sangheili that had come and gone within the span of a battle, giving signs and portents before disappearing. It was beginning to become an inside joke within the team, often leaving them breathless trying to hold back the laughter as 'Lavuree heard

tales of himself related back to him.

Thinking back on the last time he and his team had been out in the galaxy performing rudimentary duties according to the decree of the Covenant, 'Lygotee wondered if they might again perform so- but this time without that Covenant, without the traitorous members that had broken itâ€¦ and without 'Obaulee.

A pang of guilt struck him, and his features wrinkled in a concentrated effort to suppress the feeling- why did he only ever think of that loss when he least needed to? Arriving just inside the perimeter of the dubbed Brute territory, 'Lygotee and his team slowed their advance, exchanging speed for stealth. Already the scouts and a few guards were down, swift and silent, only their still bodies marking the passage of Elites, invisible all. Slowing so, he paused to count his own, the six Unggoy, and two Sangheili. 'Lavuree nodded to him, but this time he knew - almost instinctually- why the motion erased his clouded thoughts, clearing his mind for the task at hand. He smiled, and looked forward. The issue could be settled later, if he survived this final campaign, but for now he knew he was grateful for the distraction from it.

Slowly, carefully, and minding the psyche to his rear, 'Lygotee moved past the border, down the corridors to one of the smaller chambers surrounding the main open that the Brutes had congregated in. One of the things he had a bad feeling about was how old his intel was- even that number of Jiralhanae could have moved, amassing elsewhere in time to stage a massive crushing trap upon the unsuspecting Sangheili, who thought it was they who were about to do the trapping. The first room was cleared without much of an uproar, and silence settled in on the chamber as the warriors slipped through.

Seeing the last of the first wave moving forth through a corridor closed at intervals by doors, 'Lygotee hesitated to follow. He wasn't sure if 'Lavuree was telling him or not, but he suddenly had the feeling that something wasn't right. Stopping all motion, he turned to find the warrior and saw something that brought his gaze up- up, until he was looking at the domed ceiling of the Proclamation Chamber's antechamber. Hung from the center at the zenith was a turning hologram, which was normal, but holding to the projector of that hologram was a mess of ugly items he knew were not. Dropping his gaze, he hunted for 'Lavuree, a little more urgent now.

\_You already know.\_ The thought sprang from his mind as if put there. Finally spying the much-sought warrior, herding Grunts, he intercepted them to find out what, if anything, the psyche knew.

Before he could speak, though, 'Lavuree grabbed him and hauled him along. "You do not wish to linger here, Leader, do not make me tell you what you already know."

Hearing those words repeated to him aloud- you already know- sent a chill down his spine, but he nodded in agreement. 'Lavuree was right, after all- he \_didn't\_ want to linger here, even if this chamber was the last calm before the battle in which he might speak to the warrior. Matching pace, he looked ahead, at where they were going. "What do you know? Something isn't right, but I don't know what."

"Nothing is ever right in concern of Jiralhanae machinations, Commander." 'Lavuree scoffed. "This was a trap. We shouldn't have come- none of us should have come. Do you see the riggings? Do you see the explosives? They took this whole sector apart, and restored it as one large bombâ€¦ if it blows, the station will suffer, and possibly even crack in half."

'Lygotee almost swallowed his mandibles- all four of them. "Do we tell them to pull out?"

"No, it is too late. We have gone too deep, they know we are here." 'Lavuree shook his head. "I need to find the detonator, Commander. Someone needs to, and they need to destroy it. They don't know what they have done hereâ€¦ godsâ€¦ they would kill everyone, us, them, all those in between."

'Lygotee nodded. "I will look for it- I'll let you know if I see anything."

'Lavuree caught him, turning him around to stare straight into his eyes. "Do not, even if you must, go to Doaedemet."

'Lygotee wanted to pull away, but he felt glued to the floor, stiff at the joints and incapable of much protest beyond the imaginings of his mind. He was grateful when the albino let go of him, and by that release he regained motor function. Somewhat off balance at first, he staggered back, bumping 'Pohamee as the warrior sought to go past them. Catching his Commander, 'Pohamee righted him, and left him like that, without a word. 'Lygotee shook his head, in an attempt to clear it, but there was nothing to clear- the world around him felt somehow gummy, but things were still moving with ease around and past. Gathering his wits, he took a deep breath and turned to follow 'Pohamee. Perhaps he needn't stay quite so close to that psycheâ€¦

For the duration of the next passageway he kept 'Lavuree in front of him, where he could see him, following at a comfortable distance. Getting that ability out of hiding had caused the warrior to be a little too open with it, he mused, and for as much as he didn't like the way the warnings were conveyed, he knew it had to be strange for 'Lavuree as well- simply for that he had always had to edit and cross-check before saying anything at all, before- now he need only say it, like it was, and to whom it mattered.

Still, it seemed odd that this Brute named Doaedemet would be after specifically him, when they had only ever had the one encounter. So he had denied the animal his desire for 'Lygotee's head. Doubtless this had happened before? 'Lygotee did not feel special for simply having survived an encounter with the Brute, but apparently Doaedemet didn't quite see it the same way.

That 'Lavuree knew this was only more than a little disturbing. From what he had gleaned of the way the warrior's talent worked, this insistent demand that he not allow Doaedemet to get near could only mean that Doaedemet was insistent upon getting to be near- he was telling the world he planned to kill not only a few dozen anonymous Elites, but he wanted specifically to kill 'Lygotee. The concept seemed strange. But then, Brutes were strange, and the slightest wrong would set them off- it was why most of them would revert to animalistic behavior in the midst of a battle, going barreling off

into the enemy and going berserk all over them.

The door came into view; 'Lygotee paused. The last time he had laid eyes on that door, there had been a Jiralhanae Honor Guard posted at it. And the last time he had passed them, he had been to speak to the Prophet therein, the night before all hell broke loose and began industriously consuming the Command Station \_Radiant\_. This time felt as though it would only be a repeat of events, if sped up some. Terrible things would happen in that room, but then it was not as if the same had not been the norm for all the time since it had been installed. 'Lygotee started for it.

For the honor of the Sangheili!

**\*\*Chapter Eleven, part three:\*\***

**\*\*1100 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

The first explosion staggered him. The second knocked him flat, but there were far more than just two- or three, for that matter. Dial M'akamee clawed at the floor, desperate to regain his footing. Barely had he entered the chamber than the fight had started. It was well that he had not been either directly leading nor taking up the rear, as either would have been bad- if the former, he would have had nil as for backup or support troops, and the latter would have meant every Elite he had would be in that meat grinder the Brutes had prepared for them. As it stood, they were receiving a beating, but things did not look that badâ€¦ at least not yet.

Dial grabbed ahold of something that had fallen in front of him, and reclaimed his vertical position, though it did him little good, as though the saturation of the area with high explosives had ebbed, the Brutes had filed in closer to the action. Right as he turned and saw the beast, a Brute with a silver dorsal stripe lashed out at him with a hammer that had a head the size of Dial's chest. The blow would have knocked him back, possibly over several yards, had he not had his back to the same fallen object that he had used to rise. When the Brute withdrew his hammer again, the Elite sank to the floor once more, this time to remain there, crushed utterly and barely short of cleft in half.

Doaedemet roared his approval, thrusting the hammer into the air over his head and splattering himself with the armor-bits and chunks of bone and muscle mixed with copious amounts of blood. He had somehow missed that one Elite he had a hate going for, though- it didn't matter. If they had left that one behind he could always get to it later. Doaedemet had patienceâ€¦ if just a little. Swinging the mock Fist of Rukt again, he smashed another Elite, this time down into the floor. There wasn't much left of the creature when he drew back the hammer, but he hadn't expected there to be. Soaking in the blood of the enemy around him, Doaedemet had never been happier, able at last to do more to his foes than paste them with plasma rounds or shot grenades.

Turning to follow an Elite that had gone past him, the Brute swept away four Unggoy in the process, but he didn't bother to follow those up with much beyond stepping on one as he closed the gap. Engaged with the Brutes standing above it, the Elite didn't see him bring down his hammer, creating another dent in the floor with a mighty whang. The unfortunate Elite's remains squirted out from the crushing

blow to the sides and back, spraying several of his comrades. Shards of bone protruded from the textured ends of the hammer's head, but they were hardly any benefit to the effectiveness of the tool; if it had been a lighter hammer, they could have worked as little knives, but by the time any enemy unlucky enough to get hit by him realized, those little bone shards would be the least of the Elite's worries.

His whole left side filled with agony-inducing needles, blowing chunks of his leathery skin away with the following detonation. Cringing, Doaedemet spun about to glare down at the gathering of Unggoy, all pointing at the same target in an attempt to take him down. Roaring mightily, he lunged at them, hammer raised. Grunts were an annoyance, at best, but sometimes, as like now, they could become a bother. Previously unconcerned with the little aliens, Doaedemet had mistakenly allowed them to concentrate their number and then their fire, on him. With his back turned, he had been a ripe target, and he knew it. Elites streamed past him, shooting down the Brutes afore them, the Jackals above them, and the Drones above those. Fire was thick in the air, and it sizzled with the scent of burning oxygen underneath the more potent smell of burning flesh and hair. Directly before he could have crushed the whole group utterly, beneath his bulk if not his hammer, something huge and heavy slammed hard into his side and knocked not only his aim off course but the wind out of him.

Rolling from the group of little Grunts, Doaedemet jumped to his feet, gasping and raging mad, searching for the one that had dared to jump on him. From the piles of strewn bodies around him rose the biggest Elite he had ever seen. It bent, flexing at all the right points to effect either a brace or another hard thrust, whichever the situation demanded, and then growled at him, challenging.

Furious, and angry that a mere Sangheili could have grown to match himself in mass, Doaedemet flung himself at the offending Elite with only one goal in mind- rip it to pieces, and trim it back down to it's rightful size. He quickly found out that he had made a mistake in underestimating the sheer strength of his opponent, having seen an Elite and assumed he could smash it like other, normal Elites. The error in his calculations cost him his balance as he was thrust over backwards, then his mental integrity as the warrior lit off its energy blade.

Fighting not to be dismembered so easily, Doaedemet was able to gain his feet back, and after issuing a kick to the Elite's midsection, he fled the immediate proximity. In his wake he left five Grunts and another Elite, but they were not super powerful like the one he had left behind, nor were they overly large- claws sharp and long enough to dig into his muscle tissue caught him by the deltoid on his shoulder, and pulled hard in reverse. Doaedemet roared as the sizzling energy rammed through his belly from behind, but there was more fight happening around them than either alone might fend from, and this fact sent the Brute forward again as his minions dropped explosives in the area. Suffering but grateful for the respite, Doaedemet turned around, to see if his enemy was dead- he wasn't, but he'd been robbed of his shielding and his footing, and though Doaedemet too was now full of flak, he was still on his feet.

Spotting his discarded hammer, he scooped it up, and biting back the

pain that ruled his middle, lifted the weapon to strike the fallen Elite with. He was hit in both elbows at once by a hoof each for his trouble, and he buckled, the pain spiking to beyond his tolerance for long enough to rob him of his balance and his advantage. Rising, the Elite had to turn from him to fight off other Brutes, and in the maelstrom of twisting, bloody bodies, Doaedemet was able to crawl away unseen. He didn't want to fight with that one anymore, anyway. Apart from the main combat, he scraped open a pack on his bandoliers and began to mend his injury. He still had Leaders to kill.

Epileptic light shows dominated the scene, but the dance was more pushing, shoving and striking than mere motions. Despite these things, 'Lavuree was still starkly aware that the columns above them from the center of the ceiling to the floors of the verandas that circumvented the chamber were loose- or rigged to become loose, as the fact was on the minds of every enemy in the room. They would withdraw soon, and when they did, those columns would come down, each one a four-ton rod ribbed up the lengths with decorative spines. Any who were granted a glancing blow would be hurt as badly as those they landed directly upon- and while these decorations would make the columns easy to pass once they were down, the loss of ground and life to their initial falling would be immense. 'Lavuree had no way to communicate this to his brethren, but the more he thought about it and the more hopeless the situation appeared, the angrier it made him.

Somewhere in the push he had lost all six Grunts, and both teammates- and from the screaming of the wounded and the cries of the dying it was impossible to tell if any were still alive at all. The Elites at his elbows were people he barely knew, only a few having names he could remember. Following a sightline to the other side of the chamber, 'Lavuree caught a glimpse of an energy sword, something he had been withholding, himself, for fear of cutting into his own with it. Having done that once already, he was in no mood to humor the event again. He ducked sideways when another flared to life to his left, unwilling to be the next one to try being in the wrong spot.

Pressing against the back of the shoulder of another Elite, 'Lavuree raked his claws across the face of a Brute that had gotten too close, causing an instinctual recoil that allowed him to fill it's opened maw with plasma from his rifle. This had turned into the worst melee fight he had ever witnessed, bearing more towards an armed barfight than an actual battle. Everything was a mess- friend and foe alike were so badly mixed that 'Lavuree had already witnessed accidental friendly fire on both sides of the conflict.

Carbine rounds zipped off his shields, what remained of them, before a Brute coming over the top of the one 'Lavuree had just felled fired a swath of plasma straight at him, bathing his shields in a brilliant light until they finally finished failing. Ducking into the press of bodies, shoving brutally to get away, 'Lavuree dropped an Elite back that might have otherwise lost his head, staggered a Brute that was about to drive a killing blow, and tripped up another that promptly landed on him. Winded and dazed, he forgot to move when the Brute recovered and rose. Mistaken for dead, he was allowed to lie where he had fallen, but all the same he was being trampled constantly by members of both sides. Battered and bruised from being stomped and kicked so much, 'Lavuree crawled from the scene to one of the

partitioned combs under the veranda to gather his wits and regain his breath. Spotting him rising, a Brute from the fight he had left behind rushed him, lifting a grenade launcher to use the crude blade on the back.

'Lavuree met him halfway, sure since he had not fired the weapon first that he was quite possibly out of ammo- but after a strenuous fistfight and struggle for the weapon, he found out it did actually have one last grenade in it, when he pointed it point blank at the Brute and fired. Thrown down by the blast, the pair were separated and flattened at once- but for the small increment of shield 'Lavuree had managed to regain, the Elite survived where the Brute did not. Throwing the bestial weapon aside, he again rolled to his hooves, this time doing so unaccosted for long enough to pick a face from the crowd.

Seeing 'Lygotee get dragged down by a legion of Yanime'e tipped him over, and he charged back into the fray broiling mad, and blowing enemy and ally alike out of his path as he walked it. Arriving where he had seen his Commander fall, he unleashed his sword and lashed out with it, cutting the bugs back until he had unburied the hapless Elite beneath them. Grabbing an arm, 'Lavuree hauled the fortunately unharmed other to his hooves, the only thing lacking being his shield's charge.

He gave the psyche a grateful look, before taking his own sword in hand. All over the chamber the same picture was being repainted, as guns were cast down in favor of the brighter, hotter, more dangerous Sangheili blade. The conflict was simply too tightly packed for much other than that to work. But 'Lygotee was the only one to see the look on 'Lavuree's face as the swords lit up. Looking at the crowd, the albino seemed to know something they did not- and even 'Lygotee understood why when all the Brutes that could suddenly up and fled the fight. A surge of newly admitted Elites poured into the room, chasing them alongside those that had squeezed in first.

'Lygotee was staggered by the blow of the first column striking the floor, smashing into it so hard he was jolted from his footing. It had blocked the door- the next one to fall was the one in front of the rushing wave, stalling their charge. 'Lygotee's face drained of blood as he witnessed the horror unfolding. The whole thing had been a trap, a big grinder for Sangheili meat. The third column broke free, but 'Lygotee's attention suddenly shifted to closer to home when the Elite beside him, though devoid of adversaries, slammed to his knees on the floor. Glancing up after realizing he ought to have heard or felt the next one hit by now, 'Lygotee was frozen by what he saw.

Without tether or support, and without touching anything solid, the third, fourth and fifth columns hung in midair over the chamber's entrance, hovering and trembling after having fallen just enough to have come horizontal. There was no solid reason why they were not crushing masses of Sangheili and dismembering others. The sixth cracked, tipped over, and paused at a forty-degree angle with the base still touching the veranda floor. 'Lygotee looked down again, then, at 'Lavuree, to see the Elite shaking as though cold. The air around him was rippling with heat, however, and the ink on his skin had begun to run, staining in a pool around his knees. 'Lygotee tried to touch his friend, but found out the hard way that that action was ill-advised when the heat-ripples proved a real manifestation, from



real heat.

'Lavuree lifted his head, as though with great effort, and looked out at the eighth column as it too cracked from the base and began to fall. 'Lygotee watched as it tipped, slowly, too slowly to be natural, stalling to a complete halt, before starting again. The sound of teeth grinding brought 'Lygotee's gaze back down to 'Lavuree, as he tried valiantly to hold that eighth column, even though it was sinking steadily floor-ward despite everything he was giving it. Kneeling beside the albino, 'Lygotee looked into his lensed eyes. Right then he thought he finally understood everything the warrior had been trying to tell him, and the last thing 'Lavuree needed was to lose his faith right now.

"You can hold it, Rkwa." 'Lygotee whispered. "You can hold it. I believe in you."

'Lavuree's face contorted, as a small trickle of blood escaped a nostril. "â€| it's slippingâ€|" His voice was barely audible, but it was there. "â€|can'tâ€| hold themâ€| too manyâ€|"

"No, no- you can do it, you can hold them." 'Lygotee insisted, twisting to see the floating weights that really should have long ago done their dirty deeds. One by one, they were sinking towards their victims, but though his grasp was weakening for the immense strain, they fell slowly enough that the Elites they were meant to crush were able to not only escape from beneath them, but some climbed on top of them, so when they finally did settle there was plenty of standing room for all. 'Lygotee heaved a breath of relief, but when he looked again at 'Lavuree, he frowned- there was something else. He was trying to hold something else, and it was what had compromised the first eight columns.

Before he could ask, though, the Sangheili resumed their charge, now flying over the tops of the failed trap's workings. 'Lygotee stepped out from 'Lavuree to try to see what it could possibly be, and what he could do about it, when everything came unglued.

Behind him, 'Lavuree gave a cry and collapsed, and not a heartbeat later, all the rest of the columns exploded from their perches and dropped in realtime upon the Sangheili forces, slamming many hundreds into mush and knocking the rest from their hooves. Still, for the delay, more than half of the number had made it to the Brute's line and had reengaged, tearing into the hirsute behemoths as though vengeful for what had only just happened. 'Lygotee turned back to his friend, aware what time he had bought them, but before he could re-close the gap between himself and the heaped warrior, the air above him thickened with clouds of Yanime'e, raining plasma fury down on all those lucky enough to be between columns and spared that fate. It seemed a hundred broke off to kill 'Lygotee, forcing him to retreat, leaving 'Lavuree far behind.

Like he was, he blended nicely with the dead, and would be missed when the survivors were mopped up- 'Lygotee on the other hand, still vertical and animate, had to run just to keep from being singed right off his hooves.

At the far end of the Proclamation Chamber, Doaedemet despaired. How, by the Rings, had that happened? There existed no scientific explanation why, no explanation period. What strange new technology

did the cursed Sangheili have that he did not? He had had them right where he wanted them- and then the master of all plans had failed him utterly, and for no apparent reason at all. Furiously, he paced back and forth, back and forth, back again. He hadn't room to get to the fight, hadn't the munitions for that kind of conflict anyway. He held to his hammer, though, the only thing he had left from his once-glorious reign. Stopping suddenly when he spied something move against the black backdrop flecked with white that the windows afforded, he squinted at what appeared to be a starless area. Stepping in that direction, he saw it move, again, and he recoiled away in surprise and shock. A Sangheili! Realizing it was only one, and apparently alone, his nerves calmed and he grinned at the warrior.

This would be his stress-vent, how he would handle his current inability to think of what to do next. At the peak of his victory, he had gained only a crushing, bitter loss, and what? What then? Stalking towards the lone Elite, he snarled at it. "Come out of your optical shadow, Sangheili pig, and face me if you are a true warrior!"

Fading from the invisible place came quite possibly the smallest adult Elite he had ever seen- and he was not only small, but skinny, too. His face looked like death, partly sunken features showing under the scored helm. He had a couple of grenades at his hip, but he appeared totally unarmed- no sidearm, no sword on his belt, no plasma rifle in his hand. Doaedemet scowled. This would be no fight- he would just butcher this one and find no great satisfaction in the act. Seeing it as such a waste of time, he almost spat in disgust and turned his back, but he didn't- not when he saw both of the Sangheili's arms light up, along the outside from the wrist to the elbow.

"You are not allowed to speak the honored name of my people." The Elite spoke, quietly. "You will pay for your crimes against them with your life. And then the rest of your people shall follow you to the grave." He raised his arms, showing the single-bladed energy-swords in his hands.

"You are no bigger than a half-grown whelp! I shall crush you and spit on your remains!" Doaedemet roared, riled by the insult and the threat. Perhaps he might find some fun in this one's death after all, if he could dance half as well as he spoke. He raised his hammer, and lunged, maw open in anticipation of more blood.

Hoku Zimivee let him come, let him get close, before he even bothered to move. When the Brute was where he wanted him, Zimivee shot from in front of him, moving with such grace and speed that he was likened to a blur, swimming through Doaedemet's vision. He cut the hammer in half first, to open the Brute's arms, then severed them each at the shoulder, turning around the flying silver-striped behemoth and taking his legs off at the knee first, then when he tipped forward in true freefall, cut up with one hand to fully open the belly of the beast.

Slamming to the floor, defenseless, in agony, and fast becoming lightheaded, but alive and as yet coherent, Doaedemet tried to grasp his hammer, tried to jump to his feet, but he had neither arms to hold it nor feet to jump to, and he could only blubber up at the Elite that had done it to him. He could feel his intestines drooling

from the massive wound in his middle, but he knew his feces had long past mixed with his blood, and that detail was lost for the insignificance of it. The fact that he lay dying at the hooves of a relatively tiny Sangheili warrior made him mad enough to live just a little longer, though.

Long enough to speak. "You will fail, fail and die." Zimivee didn't answer. He just walked away, uncaring that the Brute would die slowly in misery. He deserved it.

**\*\*Chapter Eleven, part four:\*\***

**\*\*1322 hours; Command Station \*\*\_\*\*Radiant\*\*\_**

With the last of the fight mopped up and the final few enemy being hunted down to the last corridors in the bottom of the bowels of the station, the survivors of the Battle of the Proclamation Chamber were left in peace- relatively speaking- to mend their wounds if they could.

Enin 'Lygotee understood how lucky he was. Looking over the medical chamber he was in, he saw all kinds of survivable injury, and a few that weren't. The warrior that had been found alive with his arteries cut and gaping was remarkably still holding on, awake even, fighting to stay right where he was- alive. He was the most unruly and feisty of the bunch, as some with lesser injuries had died in surgery. The head-count came up glaringly shy of their original number, though, a stark loss that would leave much of the station empty and unoccupied. The place was full of ghosts, now.

Ghosts, that would haunt the halls forever, 'Lygotee felt, if they didn't deem it acceptable to follow those they used to know around. He still ached for the loss of 'Obaulee, but now there were others he had known who were just as dead, just as gone- among them being Avin SzÄ™naqee, Dial M'akamee, G'vil 'DÄ™thumee, and othersâ€| but the one that hurt the most was Thin 'Pohamee. He sat alone in a reasonably quiet area, the more or less inactive end of the chamber, beside the single warrior on his team he had left- Rkwa 'Lavuree.

Stripped of his armor and covered in little bandages and healing-speeder devices, 'Lygotee had been amongst the least wounded of the warriors to enter that speaker's hall. But looking at the grey-again albino he had worked beside for more than fifty years, he wondered anew how he ever could have thought he knew the warrior beside him. There was too much to take in, all at once, and he had been grateful for the gentle, gradual seepage of knowledge, but the last thing he had learned had been the one to truly stagger him, mentally as well as physically.

Who knew? Who would have thought, after witnessing the warrior fighting? Who could have guessed, even suspected, that that last, final secret, was real? 'Lygotee doubted now that his friend had granted him that suspicion- there were many things 'Lavuree was, but many things too that 'Lavuree was not.

'Lygotee sat staring at the last member of his team, hardly able to wrap his mind around the sheer complexity of it all, around the concept, but he knew what he had seen was true- 'Lavuree had never tried to cover anything that mattered, never tried to keep from him what he needed to know, even if the timing was bad. There was always

that counsel, to keep that bad timing from really ever being an issue. 'Lavuree was the one that made things make sense when all others were as clueless as 'Lygotee.

The memory of 'Lavuree's introduction to his command rang in his mind. He had initially dismissed the Elite as merely one more warrior to send and recall, to aid in the machinations of the Prophets, or any number of other deeds. And 'Lavuree had performed those things well enough, but there was that one other detail that allowed him to rise above that dismissal. Why came to mind- why try to impress those that didn't care about you? Why go, and fight, and bleed for those that you needn't bother with? 'Lygotee knew one thing, at least, at last.

Whatever it had been that had driven 'Lavuree to the fleets of the Covenant, it was different from what had kept him there. All along 'Lygotee had been building what he thought was just a band of brothers, next-of-kin to fall back to at the end of the day, when duty was done and the missions were all over. But 'Lavuree, as strange as it seemed to him then, had never once called him that- there had been times when he referred loosely to the other two as such, but not once was 'Lygotee mentioned as a brother- a sibling, an equal elbow-to-elbow with equals. He'd never understood that, because for as much as they shared things, got along well enough, worked well together, he could never get 'Lavuree to tell him why.

Maybe when you're too old to care, 'Lavuree had said. Maybe if I find you at deaths' doorâ€¦ you won't die without knowing, but I can't tell you now.

There had been nothing explaining why. No slip of tongue or accidental action, and that last, final secret had been kept not from 'Lygotee but from everyone- the entire Covenant armada, all the worlds they saw, all the ships and even this station. It was just 'Lavuree, and only 'Lavuree, who knew. And who, it appeared, was the only one allowed to know. But after speaking at length with the medic, there was nothing left to hide anymore, for the final domino had fallen. Whatever happened next would need to wait, though- that final act had driven the warrior into a coma.

Rkwa 'Lavuree had escaped the fate of hundreds of others, only to fall to this in the end. There was nothing anyone could do, but 'Lygotee knew he had nothing else to do, nowhere else to be, and after all was said and done, he owed it all to 'Lavuree. He had been there beside his friend the whole time, waiting. He had carried the albino in, after the fighting was finished, and the din within the Proclamation Chamber had settled to silence. 'Lygotee was going nowhere, he knew, until 'Lavuree either died or awoke.

Either seemed preferable to watching this slow decay. Taking a breath, 'Lygotee looked out over the bustling medical chamber, surveying the humdrum of activity. Dismissing it a moment later, he returned his gaze to the pale, unresponsive Elite lain beside him.

"Of all the secrets you have kept from meâ€¦" He began, "for each there was a reason, and for each I understood. But now when your final truth has been revealed, and all now know who and what you really areâ€¦" 'Lygotee shook his bandaged head and sighed sadly. With a hand on 'Lavuree's shoulder, he whispered, "You never once

betrayed me. You spent everything to keep me alive, and I never knew why. I didn't understandâ€¦ such faith I did not even find in 'Pohamee. But youâ€¦ you were trying to tell me something, and I just didn't hear. I often wonder why, Rkwa. Is that even your name? I guessed it was you when I thought of impossible knowledge, I suspected you when I knew beyond a doubt that it was a trap, and I credited you when I livedâ€¦ survived a thing that should have killed me. But never did I once guess that you were a female."

\_The End.\_

## 12. Epilogue

\*\* Epilogue \*\*

Sitting down, he inhaled, slowly, before letting it all out all at once. Finally, after seeing the recorder reach a point where any listener would be paying more attention due to the odd introduction, he began to speak. "This is Major Hoku Zimiveeâ€¦ you don't know me. But I know you. I know who you are, some of your names, and your purpose. I am not one of you, nor possibly will I ever be. You sent one of your own, to this placeâ€¦ my home for the past eight years. I knew him. Normally I would not bother with addressing a body I know nothing of, and care not for, but I make this report at the behest of a friend.

"You see, MÃ¼n Gazenee fulfilled his mission, completing it successfully and saving the lives of all those onboard the Command Station \_Radiant\_. He performed above and beyond the call any duty could have asked of him, and he did it with honor." Zimivee paused, letting the silence record for several seconds before continuing. Some of it was hard to say, but he needed to say it. He would say it for MÃ¼n. "Where most would have done as they saw was necessary, MÃ¼n Gazenee did more, preventing the Brutes from causing destruction on a massive scale, preserving what would otherwise have been lost and checking the abilities of the Brutes to the point of their utter defeat. There are none left alive at this time, none more to cause us trouble. We have lost many of our brothers in this battle, and we mourn them still.

"This wound is fresh, but healingâ€¦ we won, and may yet celebrate their sacrifices for the greater good of us all. They fell, but we still stand, though we are exhausted and weakened by the onslaught. Whatever we had we gave, whatever we held to we hold still, and we persevere.

"And yet, despite this, and all the valiance and glory, all our persistence and for every drop of blood we shed for the keeping of this placeâ€¦ all would be for naught if not for MÃ¼n Gazenee's actions. He alone stopped the \_Rampant\_ \_Generosity\_ from embedding herself in the station, destroying her utterly and rendering all our actions moot. He died with her when she blew, her core breaching her hull and consuming her in entirety, but he was not forgotten. You claim he never existed, you claim you do not either. But to us here at the \_Radiant\_â€¦ he existed, he served, and he died protecting those he never even knew. His memory and his name will be honored across the decks of this station regardless what you say or do, as for a single moment inside a lifetime, the few hours I knew him, MÃ¼n Gazenee taught me so much that nowhere else could I have learned, and

he came into existence in the single moment when we needed him most. There he was, there he is, and there he will always be, forever unto eternity beyond. MÃ¼n Gazenee is the sole reason we won, the only reason we persist this day, and we will not forget.

"In darkness, you will see light. In light, you will see darkness. No matter the location, you will see victory. If you fail, no one will know. Like a ghost, your presence is a mystery, you are the Mirratord. And you, I must add, have our gratitude, for it was you, ultimately, that sent us our saving grace."

Zimivee exhaled, long and slow. "The \_Radiant\_ remains intact. The \_Rampant\_ \_Generosity\_ is destroyed, the Brutes are all dead, and the Sangheili remain. I will keep your secret, fear not of me. But send someone to silence me, and regret may follow you for the rest of your days. I will not tolerate any defacing of the friend I knew for so short a time. Before he died, he gave to me his single-bladed swordsâ€¦ while I know not how to use them at present, I shall learnâ€¦ I am keeping them. They are in remembrance of the one that made all the difference, the one I was honored to have met, more so to have known. I am Major Hoku Zimivee.

"And this, this is for MÃ¼n Gazenee. As MÃ¼n would say, \_ for the honor of the Mirratord.\_"

End  
file.